CLAIRE

LESLIE BURTON BLADES

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BY

LESLIE BURTON BLADES

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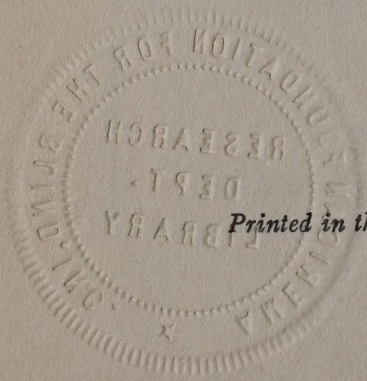

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CHAPTER I

THE STRANGE PARTNERSHIP

IN the confusion Lawrence stood still. Over the howling wind and smashing sea, he heard thin voices shouting orders. Another mass of water swept over the deck. Near him a woman screamed piteously. Instinctively the masculine desire to protect womanhood made him ache to help her, but he bit his lip and clung to the rail. If he could only see! Never before in his five years of blindness had he felt the full horror of it. He had taught himself to forget his loss of sight. It is useless to waste time in sentimental moping, he would say, but now——

"God, when will it end?" he muttered, savagely.

The *City of Panama* lurched back and forth like a rocking-horse. Somewhere forward they must be lowering the boats. He stumbled along the deck, holding to the rail for support. The spray dashed in his face, and he could feel the water from his hair trickling into his ears. He shook his head and laughed grimly, but he could not hear his own laugh-

ter. The terrific noise of the wind drowned everything else. It became increasingly difficult to keep his hold on the rail. He was wet to the waist. Each time the wave struck him higher, and he noticed that the lurching grew heavier. He was strong, six feet of hard muscle, but the water was stronger. His mouth was filled with it, and his ears seemed bursting. His rugged features twisted into hard lines. As he struggled forward, he raged at the blindness that kept him from seeing.

"Not a chance, not a chance," he repeated over and over, as he strained to hold the deck. There was a lull in the wind, and he marvelled at the absence of human sound. Suddenly he divined the cause. His mind became a chaos of rage and fear.

"They have left me," he cried, "left me without a thought." He shut his teeth hard, then ducked as another heavy beating weight of water crashed over him. It seemed it would never lift and leave him free to breathe. His arms and feet no longer seemed a part of him. He wondered if the vessel were under the surface, and nerved himself to let go. But he could not. The rail was his only hope of life. Slowly the water began to draw his fingers away from it. The next surge sent his body out—somewhere. He struck forward with both hands and kicked his feet mechanically. Was it the roar of the wind or the weight of the water itself that beat into his ears? The sudden pain in his lungs told him that he had reached the surface. How

good the air felt! Shaking the water out of his ears, he listened. Nothing but the wind was audible.

It seemed to him that he had been swimming for hours in the icy waves. Events on the ship, the shock of the boiler explosion, the rush for the deck, all seemed to have happened long ago.

"If I could only see," he thought, "I might find the ship again." It occurred to him that he might be swimming in a circle, and he resolved to keep in one direction, but how? He remembered that he had always tended to swim to the left, so he increased his right arm stroke. Suddenly a heavy timber struck him. He gasped with pain, and sank under the surface. When he came up, his hand struck the same piece of wood. With a desperate effort, he dragged himself up on it, twisting his arms and legs about it to maintain his hold.

The water, swirled by the wind, lashed him as he lay on the timber. "Land may be within sight," he thought, "and I shall never know." His fear and the cold began to work upon his imagination.

He had a clear mental picture of a sandy beach backed with trees. He felt sure he was being carried past it into the open sea, and tears came to his eyes at his helplessness.

Hours passed. He began to rave at the water, at life, at everything. Mixed, tangled masses of images heaped themselves in utter disorder in his brain: passages of verse, bits of his trained labora-

tory jargon, phrases from half-forgotten books, the delicate curves of the Water Sprite at the Exposition, and, above all, a fierce gnawing pain in his side.

Over the roar of the wind he heard something else. Was it the tumbling of breakers? He listened, then concluded that it was his imagination. But they came nearer, louder; he sat up on his plank, his nerves tense. The board lurched sideways, spun around, and the swell it was riding broke over him with a force that knocked him from his position. Over and over he rolled, until, almost unconscious, he felt his body dragging along the sand. The undertow was pulling at him. He fought furiously, digging his hands into the sand, and clawing desperately up the steep sloping beach. The next breaker caught him and rolled him past the water-line. He scrambled to his feet, and ran shakily ahead, neither knowing nor caring what was before him. It was dry land, and he was happy.

Behind him, he heard the water sweeping in. He was out of its reach, but still he ran. A rock caught him above the knees and sent him headlong into the sand. He became unconscious, and lay still, half doubled up.

How long he lay there, he did not know. When he recovered consciousness and sat up, a fierce sun was beating down upon him. His head ached, and he was hungry. "There may be people within call," he thought. Rising unsteadily, the soreness of his

muscles coming home to him, he gave a prolonged "Hello-o-o." A faint echo was his answer. He formed a trumpet of his hands and shouted louder. The echo came back stronger. "Only cliffs," he concluded.

The gnaw of hunger increased. "Clams are my best chance," he reasoned, and, turning, he groped his way to the water. When the incoming breakers washed his knees, he stopped. The intense dread that his experience had given him was crying retreat, but he stood his ground. Stooping over, he began digging in the sand. His cut and bleeding hands burned with the salt water, but he dug steadily, moving rapidly along the beach. At last his fingers turned up a round, ridged object. Feeling the edge of it, he knew that he had found what he sought. He wanted to eat the clam at once, but resisted, dropped it in his pocket, and went on digging.

When he had filled his pocket, he straightened up and started toward the shore. As he waded through the last shallow wash of the wave, his foot caught in something soft, and he fell. He rose, and then on second thought stooped to feel what had tripped him. His hand touched a mass of wet, tangled hair. He jerked it back hurriedly, and screamed. The strain he had been under was telling. Nerving himself, he reached again, and touched a face.

"A woman! Another human being! Thank God!"

Then he clutched his throat in desperation. She might be dead. He stooped and dragged the body up on the sand. He was afraid to find out if she were dead or alive, and sat beside her, timidly touching her hair.

"Fool!" he muttered at last. "If she is not dead, she soon will be." He leaned over, listening for her breathing. At first there was only the sound of the waves, then he heard her breathing come faintly. He took off his coat, emptied out the clams, and dipped it in the ocean. Coming back, he wrung it out over her face. He knelt beside her, and rubbed her arms and throat. He could feel her breast moving as he chafed her neck.

His hands were his trained observers. As he worked over her, they gave him a detailed picture which sank deep into his memory. She was splendidly made. His fingers caught the delicate curve of her throat and shoulders. Her skin was satin to his touch. He knew that the fine hair, the smooth skin, the curve and grace of her body belonged to a beautiful woman.

Taking her arms, he worked them vigorously. When he was beginning to despair, she coughed, moaned a little, and turned over on her side.

He wondered if she had her eyes open. He dared not feel to see, and sat silent, anxious, waiting for her to speak.

It seemed to him that eternity passed before she murmured, "Oh, oh. Where am I?"

"I do thank God," he exclaimed earnestly.

"Where am I?" she repeated, as she sat up.

"I do not know," he answered. "Presumably somewhere on the coast of Chili."

Her eyes opened very wide and gazed at him, as she said, "Are we the only ones?"

"I cannot tell," he replied, smiling a little. "I am blind, you see."

"Yes, I know," she said softly. "I saw you on shipboard."

"The first consciousness I had of you," he continued, "was when I stumbled over you while getting my breakfast."

"Breakfast? Where is it?"

He laid one hand on the pile of clams. She looked down at them, and burst out laughing, uncontrollably.

"It is not much," he said, "but we primitive people are simple in our needs. I worked to get them, goodness knows."

She was looking around her, twisting her long brown hair in her hands. At last she shuddered. "It's desperately lonely. Nothing but sea and mountains. I'm afraid I can't walk," she said.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "Can't walk?"

She turned toward him, smiling faintly. "I was struck when I washed overboard, and my ankle, I think, is broken. I am sorry," she added.

Her tone was slightly apologetic, and she laughed nervously. "Oh, that's all right," he said, reassuringly, then stammered, "I mean——" He hesitated, and she laughed.

"I mean that we can get along," he continued, stubbornly. "Heaven knows I am sorry. But you can't realise what it means to have some one near you who can see."

She did not answer for a minute, then said quietly, "Shall we breakfast before beginning anything else?"

He reached in his pocket for his pen-knife. It was gone. The blank expression of disgust on his face made her ask, "What is it?"

"My knife," he said, "it is gone."

They sat opposite each other, the clams between them. Each followed a different trend of ideas. He was raging at this last mishap, and considering means of opening the clams. She was conjecturing the fate of the *City of Panama* and wondering what she could do, alone here with this blind man. Her night-gown and a heavy skirt had been all she had worn when she rushed on deck in the night. She looked around her at the rocks and thought how foolish she had been to leave her shoes.

At last he rose and began to grope back along the beach.

Noticing that his hands were torn and bleeding, she said, hastily, "Don't do that. What are you looking for, anyway?"

"Stones," he answered, stopping.

"I will direct you," she told him, "left—right—a little ahead now."

Guided by her, he moved until his hand touched a small stone. He found two of them, and came back to her side.

She watched him while he tried to break a clam-shell between the two rocks.

"Let me," she said, taking hold of one of them.

"Your hands are too badly cut." He hesitated.

"Please," she said. "I can at least do the woman's part and prepare the meal. Especially when you bring it to me."

He laughed and gave up the stones.

"I am desperately thirsty," she said, breaking open the shells.

"I feel as though my tongue were swelling fast," he admitted.

They dug the clams from the shells and ate for a few minutes in silence, then she said, "I can't go any more of them."

He wondered if she were not hungry, but said nothing. After eating a few more he understood. Then he too stopped.

"I've got to find water," he said. He waited for her to speak.

At last she said, "I can see nothing that might indicate fresh water. Where will you go?"

"Up the beach, I suppose."

"There are mountains up the beach, and back of

us too. You could never find your way out." Her tone was despairing.

"True," he admitted.

There was a long pause. Then she said slowly, "It seems to be your only hope, doesn't it? Well, I guess you had better go. God bless you!" she concluded as though it were her last word.

Suddenly it occurred to him that he had been thinking and talking of himself alone. The idea of parting from this woman who could see, who, it seemed to him, he had found as his only means of salvation, immediately became impossible.

"I am going to take you with me," he stated quietly.

"You forget," she said, "I cannot walk."

He had forgotten it for the moment. Now it filled him with new terror. He laid his hand on hers. "I can't help it," he said finally, "I can't leave you. I will carry you."

"Oh, no!" Her protest was genuine.

He felt her fear that she would hamper him. "Don't be foolish," he said as though he had known her for years. "I am not being gallant. This is not a time for gallantry. I am simply being sensible. You cannot sit here, can you?"

"I can't help it, can I? I can't walk."

"I can help it," he retorted.

"It would simply make your chance of escape impossible," she argued. "It is preposterous. Why should you? Your life is worth to you as

much as mine is to me. I know what that means. I would not stay here if I could help it. I would not sacrifice my life for yours. Neither shall you sacrifice yours for mine."

"See here," he demanded, "who are you and where did you get that attitude toward life?"

It was one he knew. It was the hard, relentless theory of the struggle of animal survival which his thinking in college had led him to accept. There was in it no touch of duty, no sense of obligation, and very little pity. He had called himself a hard materialist, and had never lived up to his theory. Now here beside him in this outlandish situation was a woman quietly arguing his own philosophy of life to him against herself.

She laughed. "It's my way of thinking, and I mean it," she said, twisting her hair up on her head. "I got it out of four years of thought and reading in a college, and I do not thank the college for it. I find it very inconvenient but it is my belief. I have tried to live by it."

"So is it mine," he said, "and I mean to live by it."

"Very well," she answered. "That aggressive tone against me is not necessary. Go ahead and get through if you can. Good-bye, my friend."

"I'm afraid you do not understand," he answered her steadily. "I want to live. To do it, you are necessary to me. I need your eyes. Very well, whether you like it or not, you are going with me."

He rose quickly, and stretched his muscles. His head ached, his whole being cried for water. He knew he could not carry her far, but without her he was powerless.

"Suppose," she suggested, her eyes flashing from hazel to deep brown, "suppose you do take me. Have you any assurance that my eyes will serve you rightly?"

"Your own life, which is pleasant to you, will depend upon your eyes serving me rightly," he said coldly, as he stooped over her.

She laid a restraining hand on his arm. "And in the long days that we may have to go on together, what will you do in return for my eyes?"

"Carry you," he answered.

"Very well, but there are two things you must know," she said quietly. "First, that I am married; second, that I am quite as steadfast in my belief as I said. If you make one single attempt to establish more than a frank comradeship, based on mutual support in our unforeseen partnership, my eyes will serve you falsely."

He laughed a little as he picked her up. She gasped with pain.

"I can't help hurting you," he said, gently.

"It's all right," she answered, putting her arm around his neck so that he might the more easily bear her. "We are off on our great adventure. The halt and the blind! Such a mad pair!"

He smiled, and started slowly up the beach.

"I shall have to develop a system of one word guides," she mused.

"Left—right—slow—ahead—all right—and so on," he admitted.

Suddenly she laughed out merrily. "My friend, a stranger pilgrimage the world never knew. What is your name?"

"Lawrence," he said.

"Mine," she answered, "is Claire. Go a little to the left."

He turned slightly, and plodded through the sand.

CHAPTER II

THE WATER OF LIFE

STILL exhausted from his recent battle with the waves, Lawrence was not in the best condition for this new struggle. Before he had gone far, he was forced to rest. He lowered Claire to the ground carefully and dropped beside her. His effort in carrying her had made him breathe hard, the sun was beating down on them, and his throat was dry and parched. Speaking was becoming difficult.

"If we don't find water soon, we're ended," he managed to say.

"I'm afraid we are," she admitted. "Do you know, Lawrence, you shouldn't try to carry me. I weigh over a hundred and thirty pounds. That is too much for any man. Without me, you might make it, even though you couldn't travel so steadily ahead."

"Perhaps," he agreed. "I've thought of that. But, you see, I would have to feel my way. At best I'd get a lot of falls. I might walk off a precipice. That doesn't appeal to me, now that I've set myself to winning."

"And yet you are almost certain to wear your-

self out to no purpose if you carry me," she repeated. "If you could do it and get me through, I'd never stop you. I've a husband in America who loves me, and I want to get back to him, but you aren't equal to it. I see no advantage in dying a mile or ten miles inland. For one's grave, this is as good a place as any."

She spoke of dying in a matter of fact way that made him feel strange, though he thought of it in exactly the same way himself. He believed that he was a mere animal and that death was a mere cessation of energy. "I wonder if she feels just as I do about it," he pondered. "Perhaps not. But it can't matter anyway. Here we are, and death does seem fairly certain."

He was breathing more regularly now, though his throat burned and his tongue stuck to his mouth disagreeably.

"We'd better be moving," he said, rising with an effort.

"As you please," she assented.

Then, as he lifted her, "My ankle is swollen dreadfully. If we could find water, I'd bathe it and put a stick splint on it."

He did not answer. Silence fell between them, while he plodded ahead. They started up the mountainside and the way became increasingly difficult. There was a dense undergrowth through which he was compelled to shove his feet. There were rocks which she could not see, down which he was con-

stantly slipping. Her directions barely kept him from bumping into the trees that grew closer and closer together. Occasionally she pushed a branch aside from before him, and laughed as he stooped to pass under, throwing her forward so that she had to cling to his neck to keep her position.

On and on he forced his way, his teeth clenched, his breath broken by the strain. She made herself as easy to carry as she could, but beyond that she showed no sign of sympathy. Again and again he was obliged to stop and put her down while he rested. His head was throbbing frightfully. He gave up trying to talk.

During one of their frequent rests she had asked him quietly, her eyes filled with a soft, calculative haze, "How much are you good for, Lawrence?"

He had answered, "Till we find water." She had laughed a little at that, and it had sounded unpleasant to him.

Now she said again, "You don't face facts, do you?" He made no answer.

She continued, "It's strange how we humans are always so over-determined. One ought to know by the time he is grown that he is a mere puppet in the hands of circumstance. Now I go on hoping that you can carry me out to life and my husband, and you plod determinedly on as if you were really able to do it. Of course, you may, but it is entirely dependent upon outside things."

He was too tired to answer, even to think. Besides, that was exactly his view of the situation.

"You see," she went on, "here we are, two distinct groups of living cells, each loving life and wanting it. Our pasts have been very different, our futures would have been; but here we are. I am resentful because you are blind, because you are not stronger, because I cannot walk. You are probably resenting the same things. Perhaps you resent my saying what I do. You want me to reassure you and to promise success. If I did, you would know in your real mind that I was lying to you for the sake of getting you to do more. Yet both of us would feel happier if I could do it. I can't."

He stood up and took her in his arms without a word.

"We are going a few yards farther," she laughed. "Well, if ever any animal deserved life, you do."

He bit his lip and climbed on up the hill. In his mind he was saying over and over, "Just a mere intellect, nothing more. That's all she is." Yet in his arms she felt very feminine. The sense of her body so close to him seemed strangely out of keeping with her talk.

He remembered a few other women of her type; he wondered what the end of their daily association would be. Then gradually his thinking ceased to be clear. His thirst more and more wove itself into his consciousness until his mind was a blurred phantasmagoria, in which, repeating itself over and

over in the midst of strange ideas, would come the flashing sound of unattainable water. He did not talk, he did not think. Through the trees he wound his way with the grim determination of an animal fighting against death.

The sun passed its zenith and sank slowly. It grew cooler in the forest through which he lurched, but he was hardly aware of it. Claire, too, was rapidly losing control over herself. She had ceased to talk save to utter dull, monosyllabic commands to him. The pain from her ankle and her own thirst were blending into a dizzying maze of torture.

As darkness settled over the forest, she grew afraid. Ordinarily it would have been a delight to her, here among the trees, but now the shadowing night filled her with ideas of horror. She forgot her theories, and clung to him so that he was the more hampered. She grew afraid lest he should drop her, lest he should give up the fight, and with that came an overwhelming desire to urge him on. She thought of wild tales that she might tell to spur his faltering strength. At first she resisted, then as her desire for life grew within her, she began to lie to him. "It isn't far, just a little way to water," she whispered.

He struggled unsteadily forward. They had passed the top of the ridge and were descending the other side. He was scarcely aware of his own motion. He did not hear her directions, and stumbled

against the trees. When her ankle struck a bough, she realised in a flash of pain that he was not listening to her. Then she felt him sinking down.

Gripping his shoulder, she shouted, "Go on! Water ahead!" He heard her, his mouth opened, and he gathered himself up to stumble a few steps farther through the darkness. They seemed to be deep in a wooded ravine. He staggered again and fell.

She was thrown violently forward, and flung out a hand to save herself. As she lay there, half-dazed, suddenly she felt her fingers grow cold and wet. Water! A small stream, no larger than that from a hydrant, was trickling over the rock.

Dragging herself to it, she drank greedily. She dipped her hands in it. She laughed joyously and splashed. For a few minutes she played like a child. Then she remembered Lawrence.

Lifting her hands full of water, she threw it on his face. His mouth was open, and a few drops fell upon his black tongue. She threw another handful, then took her skirt and, wetting it, wrung it into his mouth. He twisted over on his side and muttered, "Water."

She gave him more, then, as he sat up, she said, eagerly, "Here, Lawrence, here."

Taking his hand, she pulled him toward the stream. He drank ravenously, plunging his face and hands into the little line of water, making queer noises over it.

Claire began to grow cold now, and her ankle pained her till she shook like a fevered person. He turned and sat up.

"You cold?" he managed to mutter hoarsely.

She wanted to say "No," but her will was worn out. "Yes," she answered, "very cold."

He laughed a little guttural laugh as he drew off his coat. "Take it," he said, dropping it near her hand.

She took the coat and drew it on. Lawrence was drinking again from the stream. She listened to him for a time, as she lay there in the darkness, then gradually her suffering and the strain under which she had been won the victory over her consciousness, and she heard no more.

He lay where he was, half unconscious. At last he began to feel the chill of the place and drew himself up toward Claire. She did not move. "We've got to do the best we can," he thought, and moved close to her so that their bodies might warm each other.

CHAPTER III

THE WAY OF THE PRIMITIVE

CLAIRE was the first to wake. She sat up and gazed around her. The morning sun was just breaking through a heavy fog that had drifted in from the ocean. Her clothes were damp, and she was chilled through, while her swollen and discoloured ankle throbbed with steady pain. She looked down at the sleeping man beside her, and her forehead gathered in a little thoughtful frown. Then she looked around her again. Despite the knowledge of their desperate situation, she could not help noticing the beauty of the scene.

Great trees grew in massive profusion all about them. Heavy tropical moss hung from the branches and trailed its green mat over the stones. Birds were beginning to sing, their notes breaking the silence of the place in sharp trills. Then she studied her companion. Finally, she laughed aloud.

"Lawrence," she said, gaily.

He turned and sat up, yawning drowsily. "What is it?" he demanded.

"We are certainly the primitive pair."

"H'm, I suppose. Anyhow, I feel better for my sleep."

"It's beastly cold," returned Claire, "and my ankle is playing fits and jerks with me."

"We'll have to do something about it," he said, earnestly. She did not answer.

"We can bind it up, I presume," he went on, holding his arms to his breast for warmth. "But it's a frightful inconvenience."

"Admitted," she said quickly. "It can't be helped, however."

"I'm very much for a fire," he suggested, as though he had not noticed the hint of hardness in her voice.

"Some twenty feet ahead is a flat rock. We might build one there. Have you matches?"

He shook his head. "We'll have to go it primeval."

"But I don't see how——" she began.

"Never mind," he answered, with a malicious grin. "I do know some few things."

"Perhaps you also know how to find food when there isn't any," she retorted.

He rose without replying.

"Well," she continued, "I see plenty of roots and stuff. We may as well prepare to eat them. It's unbelievable that I should be here, and with you. It's a horrible nightmare, this being stranded and lame out here somewhere with a blind man."

He winced, but answered quietly, "I'm not especially charmed, myself. I could prefer other things."

She looked at him and smiled. "Don't ever let me repeat those sentiments," she said, simply. "I'm sorry. Of course you aren't to blame, and I shouldn't have said that."

He stepped forward timidly. "Will you suggest the best means of finding dry wood?" he asked, as though the matter were forgotten.

She pursed her lips and looked around her. "This moss seems to be feet deep," she said at last. "You might dig up some that is dry, and with that as a starter you can add twigs."

He stooped and began to tear away the moss. His hands were stiff, but he worked rapidly and before long he had a heap of the brown, dry stuff from underneath.

She watched him silently. When he stopped, she said, "Straight to your left is the rock. Get the fire started. Then you can move the invalid."

He took the moss and felt his way to the rock, which was eight or ten feet square and practically flat, standing up almost a foot from the ground.

"Now for a dry stick or two," he said, cheerily.

She directed him, and at last he found what he thought would do. Then began the age-old procedure of twisting a pointed stick between one's hands, the point resting on another piece of wood, until friction brought a flame. It was a long, hard experiment; several times he stopped to rest; but the consciousness of the sceptical expression he knew to be on her face sent him quickly back again to his

task. At last the moss began to burn. True, it smoked much and flamed little, but he gathered twigs from the shrubs near by and in time had a good fire. Then he carried Claire to the rock and set her down beside it. She leaned her elbow on the edge and said, happily, "It's quite a success, Lawrence. I really feel as though we were progressing."

"Our woodcraft will doubtless improve with experience," he answered, and both of them felt a sinking at their hearts.

"Next, I guess we had better bathe your ankle," he observed, as though giving due care to the order of procedure.

"Very well," she replied.

At her suggestion, he gathered moss and wet it in the tiny stream. She wound it about her ankle and held it tightly.

"Now the surgeon orders splints and bandages," she said.

He brought several sticks, and with a strip which she tore from the lining of his coat, she bound them fast.

"There," she said, sighing, for the pain was wearing. "That ought to help. I wonder what our distant grandparents did in such cases."

"Made the best of it," he said cheerfully. "Many of them died, I suppose."

"And we are back again at their game. Whether we can outwit the master strategist and survive is at least interesting to try."

"In any event, we'll have to eat to do it," he said, shortly.

She studied the greenery about her, meditatively. "It's probable that most any of these things are edible, but are they nourishing?"

"We'll try them. Which shall I get?" he asked.

"I hate to start in on roots or leaves. If we only had some berries!"

He got up determinedly. "I'll go down the ravine and hunt. If I get mixed in directions, I'll shout."

She watched him go, and when he had disappeared through the trees she felt strangely sadder and very much alone. She fell to wondering if he were really so necessary to her. Sooner or later would come the inevitable problem between them. Would he fall in love with her, and would she, in the days that they might be alone together, find his companionship growing into any really vital proportion in her life? That she, Claire Barkley, rich and independent, whose life had been selfish to a marked degree and who had never considered anything except from the point of view of vigour, perfection, or beauty should ever love a blind man was incredible.

"No," she thought, "not even the closest of daily relationships with him could ever make me really care. He is not of my life." She wondered how much she would sacrifice for him if it were necessary in their pilgrimage toward civilisation, and she answered herself, frankly, "No more than I must to

maintain a balance in our forced business partnership." She knew that was all this meant to her.

From down the ravine she heard him shouting lustily, and she answered, her clear, rich voice waking pleasant echoes as she called. She waited for some time before he came. In his arms he carried a bundle of branches loaded with red berries, while in one hand was a clump of large mushrooms.

Claire watched him as he approached, and was surprised at the ease with which he walked. There was less hesitation in his stride than she had thought, and he came briskly through the trees, dodging as though by instinct.

When he reached the rock, it was characteristic of her that she said, "You came through those trees remarkably well."

He laughed. "I have an uncanny way of feeling things on my face before they touch me. I experimented somewhat with it in the laboratory at college. It's a sort of tropism, perhaps, such as bugs have that enables them to keep between two planks or that turns plant roots toward the sun. Anyway, I've brought some breakfast. These berries may be good, and these other things may be toadstools. I brought them along."

"How does one tell?" she asked.

"Oh, mushrooms are pink underneath and ribbed like a fan."

She examined them and said they might be mush-

rooms, they looked it. He sat down again, but not until he had replenished the fire.

"They may be poison, both of them," he hazarded. "That's our sporting chance. Will you try them?"

Claire took some of the berries and ate them. "I don't feel anything yet," she announced, after a minute's solemn munching.

"Oh, you probably won't for several hours anyway," he said lightly. Then he continued, "If we could devise a way, we might heat water and cook the mushrooms. Then, too, I've been thinking we might even catch a bird."

"Neither sounds very simple."

"Nothing in life is simple," he replied. "At home in America, where we leave food getting to the farmer, dress from a store, and go to Heaven by way of a minister, things are fairly well arranged, but here we aren't even sure of salvation unless we mind the business of thinking." He continued after a pause, "Of course, I don't especially remember that I counted on Heaven. It always seemed a bit distant in the face of living and working. Perhaps, however, you counted it as vital."

"I was fairly occupied with more immediate things," she answered. "However, that is a different world from this. What we did, then, can't especially matter to us here. This is our place of business, so to speak, and social life doesn't factor."

"I see." He accepted the snub, thoughtfully.

"But this business of ours will grow exceedingly irksome without talk. I doubt if we can find the means of escape an all-sufficient topic."

"We haven't boiled our water yet," she retorted. "And the bird is still free to roam."

He did not carry on his line of thought aloud. If she had known what was going on in his mind, she might have been angered. He was wondering just how much thinking she was capable of. Certain that she was beautiful, he had scarcely allowed that to occupy him. His experience had led him to estimate people almost wholly by their ability to be open-minded. In his struggle against blindness, he had concluded that open minds were rare, indeed, and persons who limited his freedom of action or tended to baby him he had grown to dismiss with a shrug. Claire did not belong to that class. "She has shown remarkable willingness to let me go my own pace," he thought, "but is this due to her mind or to mere indifference?" He decided at last that the relationship would be tiresome for both of them and that she was not especially eager to prevent it from being so. This conclusion led him to adopt a definite attitude toward her. She could do as she pleased; he, for his part, would treat her simply as an uninteresting person, a machine that furnished the eyes which he could use in his travel to liberty.

He recalled how when he had been displeased with convention he had thought of life in the wild

as the best possible means of liberty, and he laughed.

Claire looked up. "What is there amusing just now?"

"Myself, and you."

"Why, pray, am I amusing?" Then she was sorry she had said it.

"Because you are you."

"And are you other than yourself?" she asked, scornfully.

"Not at all, but my own particular interests seem infinitely more important to me than there is any possibility of yours doing."

"You mean, you are an egotist."

"Frankly, I am," he agreed. "One is an egotist, I suppose, when he finds himself and his needs and whims essentially worth while. I'll admit I find mine so. Perhaps you feel the same about yours. One scarcely knows where egotism and vanity meet or end in a woman." He smiled, for he meant that to provoke, and it did.

Claire's voice was edged when she replied. "A very penetrating remark. With men generally, vanity seems to be a widely extended cloak to spread over all things in a woman that they cannot dispose of in any other way. If I find you dull, or if I am not struck with your ability, or if you do not seem to me sufficiently fascinating, I am possessed of feminine vanity."

"Precisely. And why not? If I choose to regard myself as all those things which you deny, why

shouldn't I find the fault in you rather than in myself?"

"Because it may be in you," suggested Claire.

"It may, but that doesn't alter the case. I quite agree that you are right, but none the less you are at fault, because I, Lawrence, am the most important of all things to me."

She did not answer. The conversation seemed to her useless. She saw no reason for arguing the matter, and she half suspected that he was simply teasing her. Besides, she could not but feel that to sit here in his coat and discuss egotism was a trifle ridiculous. He was merely trying to establish a friendship in talk which she did not care to encourage. That was her conclusion.

As he rose to gather more sticks, he asked, "Do you happen to see a rock that flattens to an edge?"

Told where he might find one, he brought it and struck it hard against their boulder. It did not break. "It may do," he said, thoughtfully, and began to grind it against the side of the other rock. He worked hard and long, and the result was a fairly good edge which was nicked and toothed but still an edge. He laid it down with a sigh of contentment.

"My first tool," he commented.

CHAPTER IV

MUTUAL DISLIKE

ALL day Lawrence worked, and when night came he had hollowed out a piece of log to a depth of some eighteen inches, leaving six inches of solid wood in the bottom. Both were very well pleased with the result. With the coming of darkness, he gathered more berries, and heated water in his log kettle. They were able to cook the mushrooms and to bind her ankle in moss soaked in hot water. The building of a shelter was discussed, but both decided to resume their journey on the following day, so they slept again in the heavy moss.

In the morning, Claire was glad, indeed, of the hot water, for it warmed her, and her ankle felt much better. They decided to follow the little stream which would doubtless wind its way somehow around the present ridge back to the ocean. Accordingly, they kept down the ravine, which cut across the ridge in a southerly direction.

For the whole of that day and the next they followed the stream, which grew to a small creek. At noon of the third day they dropped suddenly down a steep slope to find themselves at the juncture of

their stream with a river which flowed through a deep gorge out to the ocean. They determined to follow it up toward its head.

"Somewhere inland must be a town," argued Claire. "At any rate, it's the only way we can go."

After living for four days on berries, they were beginning to feel acutely the need of other food, but they discussed the problem at length without arriving at any feasible solution. Two days later, fortune temporarily relieved their difficulty.

They were following along the side of a steep ridge overlooking the river, when she suddenly stopped and gave a cry of delight. Near them a small, furry animal, caught in a tangled mass of wire-like creepers, was struggling to free itself. He killed the creature with his stone-edged tool and after barbecuing it on the end of a stick, they ate it ravenously. Each of them would have disliked the whole scene at any other time, but now neither thought anything of it until after they were satisfied.

Leaning back against a rock, Lawrence stroked his chin, which was rapidly becoming invisible under a heavy beard. "I hadn't known I was so hungry for real food," he laughed.

Brown as a gipsy, her hair filled with tiny green leaves, Claire looked at him, her eyes shining with the warm light of satisfied hunger. "We ate like two beasts," she remarked languidly, and laughed. "It was simply disgraceful."

"I know," he began to muse, "it doesn't take long for the most polished man—not that I ever was that—to become a savage."

"You look the part," she laughed. "I suppose I do, too. My hair is matted, hopelessly; the curliness makes it worse. My face, too, is rapidly hardening under this sun. If only I had a few more clothes"—she stopped and looked at him. "I feel the need of them," she finished, lamely.

Claire had worn his coat continuously from the first night, and his undershirt was tearing from contact with bush and tree. He grinned, contentedly, however.

"If you approach nakedness as rapidly as I," he chuckled, "I fear we both will have to avoid civilisation. Undisguised humanity isn't tolerated there."

She flushed warmly, then laughed.

"I wonder why people are so afraid of being seen," Lawrence went on. "Of course, there's the warmth and natural protection of clothing, but one would feel so much freer without the encumbrance of shirt-stud and feathered plume."

"We need them to complete a personality," said Claire. "I know few people who would inspire respect in their elemental state. Stripped of advertising silk and diamond, they wouldn't be so suggestive of wealth."

"But why be so eager to impress others with your power?"

She turned toward him with a faint smile. "If

you didn't ask that as mere conversation, I would think you childish. You know very well why. It probably goes back to the days when the possession of a fish-hook, more or less, meant surer life. It has come to mean, now, that the decoration of an extra feather or white flannel trousers means advantageous position, the place of more power, more pleasure, in short, greater fulness of living."

"But we are living fully, goodness knows," he interrupted. "This last week we have had to exert our wits and bodies in more ways than we ever did before in all our lives. True, I do miss my modelling somewhat." He spoke the last with a soft mellowness in his voice and a wistfulness that made her look at him quickly.

"Modelling?" she asked.

He nodded slowly.

"What sort of modelling?" she insisted.

"Oh, probably poor, for the most part. I did some work that was beginning to make its way, though."

"You mean sculpture?"

He nodded again.

She looked at him earnestly. Here was a new revelation. She had wondered at this man's apparent keen sense of form, and his imaginative power when he spoke of colour or mentioned line, and she had been sure from his occasional word that he was a wide student of literature.

"What did you do at home?" she asked, abruptly.

"Oh, played with living," he said, indifferently.

She felt irritated that he would not tell her more of his life, yet she remembered that she had practically refused to discuss her own with him.

"See here, Lawrence," she said, suddenly. "We aren't quite fair with each other, are we?"

"Why not?" he answered, quietly. "I carry you toward your old life, you guide me toward mine. It's a fair business, with equal investment. I'm not complaining."

She was silent and watched him as he lay on his back, dreaming of days at home with his work. As he lay there, she studied his hands. They were practically healed, and she noticed they were well-shaped, the fingers long and tapering yet with an appearance of unusual strength. She knew already that they were sensitive: when he had cut out a piece of wood to heat water in, she had seen that. So they were sculptor's hands. What a revelation, and what a pity that he was blind! She fell to wondering if he really was good at his work, or whether he merely fancied he was and hewed away without real artistry, deceived by his blindness. She studied his face in repose. Then her mind came back to his hands, and she felt a sudden sense of displeasure, a little chagrin, and some wonder, accompanied by the feeling that she wished he had not carried her. She did not quite know why, yet the dependence on him made her restless. Suddenly she wondered poignantly what he thought of her. The more she

wondered, the more she wanted to know, and at last she ventured, "Are you asleep?"

"No, dreaming."

"Lawrence."

"What is it?" He sat up and waited.

"What do you think of me?" She was surprised to find herself waiting eagerly for his answer.

He laughed outright, a gay, hearty laugh.

"Claire," he said merrily, "you embarrass me dreadfully. You see, I haven't thought much about you. However, if you like, I'll study you for a week and report."

Hot anger surged up in her. "You needn't bother," she said, dryly; "our lives are so utterly different in every phase that nothing could be gained."

He lay back carelessly. "So I had decided," he replied, and lapsed into silence again.

She could have cried with vexation. For the first time in her life Claire was utterly humiliated, and there grew within her an aggressive dislike for this man, a determination to make him feel her power and to punish him for his indifference. She did not want him to love her, by no means, but he had never even shown her the courteous deference, the admiration or regard that she was accustomed to receive from men. Her mind went back over the past week, and she grew more humiliated, more angry. Tears of vexation came to her eyes, but she brushed them away fiercely.

"Shall we take the remains of our meat and move on toward the habitats of men?" said Lawrence, sitting up.

She controlled herself to answer, "As you please."

He stooped to lift her into his arms. She flushed warm as his hands slipped under her and he straightened up. She hesitated, and wanted not to do it, but realised the necessity and put her arm around his neck.

"I shall be grateful when I can walk," was her comment.

"It will make our progress more rapid," he agreed, and she was angry again. She knew that he thought only in terms of the most efficient means of getting ahead. A longing possessed her to make him realise that he was physically distasteful to her.

"We are so vastly different," she said, "it is disagreeable to be carried this way."

Lawrence flushed, and she was pleased. At least he understood now.

"Of course," he admitted, calmly, "it isn't pleasant, but I suppose one must make the best of a bad bargain."

There was silence for a while, then he said suddenly, "I think, I realise, Claire, that a blind man is at best a poor companion for a woman who is accustomed to being amused and whose interests are those of the society glow-worm."

Claire resented the picture, but she kept her voice

steady. "Surely at home you had your own social group," she said, pleasantly.

"Of a sort, yes. We were all workers, not going in much for form, entertainment, and that sort of thing. We generally sat in the gallery at the opera, and did mostly as we pleased everywhere. None of us were rolling in wealth. We worked for the love of it, and looked to the future for pay."

"I see." She was thinking fast. "You were struggling young artists." Her voice was sugar-coated.

"We were struggling young artisans," he answered, seemingly indifferent to her irony.

As he made slower progress when he talked, she did not attempt to carry on the conversation. The stops for rest were gradually lengthening out, and he was getting hard and wiry so that his endurance was greater. He was quicker at catching himself when he stumbled, and he did not puff so hard between grades. Claire felt the easier swing of his body when he walked, and noticed that he was growing surer of foot and more graceful in movement, and she realised that except for his eyes he was a splendid specimen of manhood. She now admitted all these things to herself, but they only added to her feeling against him. She wondered if he had been as indifferent to all women as he was to her, and was displeased that she wondered.

Suddenly, Lawrence stopped and put her down

by his side. Claire looked up at him and saw his forehead gathering in a frown.

"What is it?" she asked, anxiously.

"You are letting your thoughts obstruct your eyes," he said, simply. "I have walked into three boulders without your knowing it."

"I am sorry," she said, earnestly. "It was silly of me."

He laughed and sat down. "You see, as eyes you can't afford to think. At other times perhaps I, too, should wander into abstractions, but at present it won't work."

"I know it," she admitted, contritely. "I won't repeat it."

"What," he asked, "is the subject of all this meditation?"

She blushed, and her eyes darkened. She wondered whether she should tell the truth, started to do so, then changed her mind. "I was asking myself what my husband was probably doing and thinking."

"Poor fellow!" Lawrence was sincerely thoughtful. "I can imagine what it must be to him, supposing you lost at sea. Yes, he must be suffering badly. I don't believe I would change places with him."

Claire stared at Lawrence. "Are you flattering me?" she asked, coldly.

"Not at all," he replied. "I am merely stating the truth. I have an imagination, my dear lady. I

can quite grasp your husband's position. You would certainly be a loss to a man who loved you, and I shouldn't care to be that man."

"Shouldn't you?" she said, instinctively, and bit her lip for saying it.

"Not under the circumstances," answered Lawrence. "I never did fancy the idea of death visiting my loved ones. I have never gotten over its having done so."

"Oh,"—her voice softened—"then you have lost your——" She waited.

"I am an orphan," he said, brusquely.

She was ashamed of her relief. How ridiculous it was to have imagined him, even for an instant, as a married man! He was so cold, so impersonal, of course he had never married and never would. Well, that was best; a blind man had no right to marry. He owed it to himself and to any woman not to place her in the position of caring for him, handicapped as he was and so unable to give her the companionship, the comradeship a woman deserved. She could see how he would treat a wife; feed her well, clothe her, care for her comfort, and talk to her if she desired, but he would never be tender, loving, sympathetic or understanding. No, he could not be, he was too self-centred, too much the artist. That last seemed to her a correct estimate of him, and she settled her mind on it as being final.

"So you are alone in the world," Claire said, renewing the conversation.

"Quite," answered Lawrence, "I am as free from family hindrances as a young wolf that runs his first season's hunt alone."

She thought how apt a comparison he had made. "So you regard the family as a hindrance?"

"Oh—no and yes. One can never do quite as he pleases while a family and its wishes, aims, and loves are concerned. They always hold him down to some extent. He is an equal hindrance to them. They love each other, and as a result they have to sacrifice their individual wishes. But the family keeps man more social, more gregarious, and less selfish. If we were as free from family love as is the wolf I mentioned, we would be able to live our lives more completely, and on the other hand, we would die in greater numbers. The love of man and woman for each other and their children lifts humanity out of its serfdom, but it also places limitations. You ought to know more about that than I; however," he laughed. "I merely theorise."

"So I noticed," Claire observed. "One can easily gather that you aren't experienced."

"No. My parents died when I was small. I had to work my way through school. The accident made it somewhat harder, but I got along." He was plainly matter-of-fact.

"Oh!" She exclaimed at his words more forcefully than she had intended.

He smiled a little, comprehendingly. "Yes, it explains a lot, doesn't it?" He spoke carelessly. "You doubtless can now understand my lack of social grace."

She thought to deny it, but that seemed foolish. He was silent, and there seemed little use in talking. Claire knew she understood him well enough.

CHAPTER V

THE FACE OF DEATH

IN the days that followed they talked but little. Lawrence had fallen into the habit of speaking only when she seemed to desire conversation, and his mind was occupied with planning their escape. If he thought of her in any other way than merely as his eyes he never showed it. Though watchful of her comfort, in every act and word he was markedly impersonal.

Following the river, they had progressed steadily north and east over increasingly higher and rougher ground. The tropical vegetation of intertwining crimson was now changing to a faint gold. There were days when they were forced to make long detours over broken ridges to get around some deep gorge through which the grey-green stream dashed its foamy way downwards. They were well into the mountains, and above them the higher Andes raised their snowy peaks in forbidding austerity. It was daily growing colder, and their clothes were now only ragged strips. Then came days when sharp, biting winds whipped through the canyon they followed or headed against them on some plateau, and they were forced to face new issues.

Food was less plentiful, and winter was at hand. To be sure they were in the tropics, but on the mountains the air was cold, and warmer clothes became imperative.

Claire's ankle was almost well. After weeks of pain which she had borne bravely, it was healing, and the time was near when she would be able to walk. Shoes were absolutely essential for her. Furthermore, Lawrence's own shoes were worn through, and his walking was becoming a continual pain. In spite of Claire's increasingly careful guidance, he stepped on small sharp rocks that dug into his flesh. He did not complain, but Clare knew that he was suffering. The times when he stepped out freely became more and more seldom, and his face was usually taut.

They were, indeed, a pitiable couple. Lawrence's thin face was shaggy with hair. Claire's once soft skin was now brown and hard. Both were thin and wiry, with the gaunt lines of the under-nourished showing plainly.

One morning, to fight the frost that bit into them, they were forced to build a fire long before dawn. As they sat huddled together over it, Lawrence finally broached the subject that had been engrossing both their minds for days.

"Claire," he said, thoughtfully, "we can't make it through. We'll have to find a place somewhere and prepare for winter. It's tough, but it's inevitable. I hate to give up now, but it will be even worse

for us if we don't get meat, fur, and a house against the snow that will soon be covering everything."

"I know," she said, sadly, her thin hands supporting her chin. "It seems as though we had played our long farce to its end. Death is as inexorable in its demands as life." The circles under her eyes were great half-moons.

"We have done well, though," he argued. "We've done better than well. Who would have believed that a blind man and a crippled woman could have come as far as this?"

"I didn't believe it, Lawrence," she said, and her voice and eyes were full of a warmth that had grown of late to be fairly constant. "I didn't believe it, and I wouldn't believe it now if I were told the story, back home."

"I'm not sure; I might have," Lawrence said, proudly. "I know the blind and their capabilities."

"I'm learning to know them," she admitted, and lapsed into silence.

"Shall we go into camp, then?" he asked, as if they had not mentioned anything else.

Claire hesitated, then said slowly, "It's our only chance. Are you willing to spend a winter with me?" Her eyes glanced amusedly at him.

Catching the note in her voice, Lawrence laughed. "It seems inevitable," he said, "and, anyway, I couldn't ask for a better companion. You don't disturb me, and I don't irritate you—that is, not especially."

She looked at him, impatiently. "Don't you?" she said, meditatively. "Well, I'm glad I don't bother you."

"Yes," he assented, seriously. "You've been mighty open-minded, Claire, and you haven't hampered me with incredulities."

"Oh, that is what you mean."

He moved uneasily, his muscles drawing a little. Claire saw and wondered.

"Yes," Lawrence said, shortly. "When morning comes, we'll hunt for a location."

They ceased speaking, each occupied with his own thoughts.

Claire was asking herself what the winter would mean to her, spent with this silent man, and he was questioning how long she would continue to regard him as a mere imperfect carrier, devoid of the stuff that men are made of. Sometimes when her body was in his arms, he had wondered if she was capable of love, but always he had remembered her husband, her social life, her assumption of superior reserve, and had forced himself into an habitual attitude of indifference. The strain was telling on his will, however, and often he longed to make this woman see him as he was. He thought of the old days in his studio when he had proved himself master of blindness in his power to imagine and carry the sense of form into the carved stone. He recalled the praise of his comrades, and over all else

there surged in him the swift, warm blood of the artist.

"Lawrence," said Claire, suddenly. "At what do you value human life?"

"That depends," he answered, "on whose life it is."

"Well, at what would you value mine?" she demanded.

"From varying points of view, at varying prices. From your husband's point of view it is invaluable. From your own it is worth more than anything else. From my point of view it is worth as much as my own, since without you mine ceases."

"Then your care of me and all your trouble is merely because you value your own life."

"What else?" He moved uneasily.

She ignored that question. "If you could get through without me, would you do it?"

"That depends on circumstances. If I could get through without you and do it quickly, and could not get through with you"—he paused—"I should leave you behind."

"And suppose, when I can walk, I do that myself?"

He smiled. "As you please," he said quietly. "I advise you to make your estimate well, however. My hands and strength are assets which you might have trouble in doing without."

"And do you estimate the whole of our relation-

ship on a carefully itemised basis of material gain and loss?"

"Claire, isn't that your understanding, stated by yourself, of our partnership?"

"Yes, but—well, it's hard to estimate human companionship."

"I know it." He shifted nearer the fire. "I've tried to estimate yours."

"Indeed?" Her voice was full of interest.

"I've failed. You are worth a great deal, potentially."

"Exactly what do you mean?"

"I mean just this"—he stood up suddenly and faced her, his shadow covering her like an ominous cloud—"that as Mrs. Claire Barkley, you are worth nothing to me except eyes, and therefore your personality and conversation are of value only as time fillers."

"Go on," she said steadily.

"But as Claire, the almost starved, ragged human being who is living with me through a prolonged war with death, you are worth everything to me—everything that I value."

"But isn't that what I have been from the beginning?" she flashed.

He answered slowly. "Yes—in a way."

Once more they lapsed into silence. In turn, she tried to estimate his worth to her, but failed. She began to recall the men she knew, and concluded that she was without a standard of measurement. One

by one, she pictured them and cast them aside, as somehow not the scale by which to evaluate this man. At last, she began to think of her husband. It had not occurred to her to think of him in comparison with Lawrence before, and it made her wonder at her doing so now.

She fell to dreaming of the man who had been her lover in girlhood and her husband and dear companion these past six years. He was surely at home, aching, yearning for the little girl he had lost. She could see him sitting before the fire-place in their big living-room, his head on his hands, his tired face in repose, while he gazed into the flames and longed and longed for her. The picture grew in clearness. She saw the joy that would be his when they met again, and she felt around her those dear arms, crushing her against him in a rapture of reunion. In sudden contrast she was again conscious of the cold, impersonal arms of the man beside her. As she thought of the difference she hated Lawrence wildly. At least her husband knew her worth. He knew her golden treasure-house of love, he knew her as she was.

This blind man before her there, unkempt, hard, expressionless, what did he know of her? What could he know, born of poor people, and working his way among inferiors? She almost laughed aloud. Why, at home this man who had carried her in his arms would have been one of her wards, an object

of her charities. But would he? Lawrence was an artist. She considered that.

"Isn't it light enough to get moving, Claire?" His rich, warm tones broke in upon her thought like a shattering cataract. How musical and vibrant his voice was!

"I think so." She stood up, unsteadily.

"Good. We'd better go down nearer the river. We will want a sheltered ravine for our winter camp."

"Very well." She threw her arm over his shoulder. "It isn't far down, and it's clear going. When we start again, I'll be able to walk. And then I'll lead you, Mr. Lawrence." She spoke half in jest.

"And if we are alive, I shall make it possible for you to do so comfortably. I hope for something to make shoes of." He answered with a frank, sincere joy at her being able to walk, and she was ashamed of her anger. He was not to blame for being anxious to have her well; to have felt otherwise would certainly have been to be a fool indeed. She should rejoice with him, for then they could get home that much sooner, home to her husband and her old life. She warmed at the idea, and felt a sense of gratitude toward Lawrence that was good and wholesome. "I have been silly," she thought; "he is really not to be expected to fall down and adore me, and certainly I ought not to blame him for being blind. He couldn't help that, either."

"Lawrence," she said aloud. "I am a beastly unjust wretch."

"I don't see it," he protested.

"But you ought to see it. I don't play fair with you."

"You said that once before, I believe. I don't agree any more now than I did then."

"But I think all sorts of beastly things." She could not understand her sudden, penitent confession.

"Oh"—he paused. "So do I. But as I am not a Puritan, I scarcely hold myself responsible to you for my thoughts. One's thoughts are his own, and, as long as he keeps them to himself, he is entitled to as many as he pleases, of whatever variety he prefers."

"Do you think so?"

"Of course, and so do you."

"Yes, I did—but it seemed to me," she faltered, "that in the present case—oh, well, let it go." She laughed nervously, and said no more.

Lawrence wondered at her silence, and wanted to know very much what she thought, but he told himself that after all it was none of his business.

They had reached the river. The water rushed from the mouth of a gorge in rapids that sent its every drop sparkling and flashing over a great rock into a mass of white foam below.

"Oh," cried Claire, "it's beautiful, beautiful!"

He put her down and laughed. "It sounds as if

it were leaping from points of light into cloud-banked foam."

She stared at him in amazement. "It is," she said in a subdued tone. "How did you know?"

"One learns," he said carelessly. "And how about a camp?"

Her admiration of him vanished into the commonplace.

"We can't find it here," she said, hiding her appreciation of the scene under her professional-guide tone.

He frowned. "Nowhere close?"

"No. And what is worse, we'll have to go over a mountain. The stream here is rushing right out from between cliff walls."

Lawrence's spirit sank, but he did not show it. "We'd better eat what little we have left and then be off," he suggested, simply. From the pocket of his coat she drew a bunch of turnip-like roots which they had found fairly edible when cooked.

"We can make it back to our fire in the time we could build one here, and it may not be out," she said. After filling their crude block-pail with water, they followed Claire's suggestion, and made their way back to the fire.

That morning was the beginning of their hardest experience since they first left the beach. Scarcely had they started to climb over the great ridge which broke into sheer precipice at the river, when a sharp wind rose and cut through their unprotected bodies.

Claire drew in against him as close as she could, while he tried to give her more protection with his arms. The slope was steep and filled with loose rocks so that he lost ground at every step. They were forced to stop often, and by noon he was worn out, and they were both bitterly cold. Claire thought they were near the top, so Lawrence nerved himself to press on.

Night found them standing on the crest of the ridge, in the face of a bitter wind; before them, across a small plateau, rose a still higher mountain around the northern side of which a ravine cut its jagged gash away from the river. Claire stared at the scene until her courage broke down.

"We can never do it, Lawrence," she groaned, and her head sank wearily against his shoulder. Her cry was the aching moan of a heart-broken child. The proud, self-contained Claire was gone. It stirred Lawrence strangely, and for the first time a warm tenderness for her came over him. He drew her to him, and tried to comfort her. Her poor, under-nourished body shook with the sobs that despair and the cold wrung from her, and though his own hands and body were blue, he tried to warm her. Had he seen the ground ahead of them, he, too, might have given up, but blindness was the barring wall of black which shut out even defeat. He clinched his teeth firmly, and lifted Claire in his arms again, resolutely.

"We've got to do it, Claire," he said, "and we will."

She attempted to paint the scene before him in graphic detail, her words broken by sobs. When she finished, he started forward.

"We'll follow the gulch," he stated. "We must keep going, Claire. We don't dare to stop."

"We can't. It's dark, and will be black soon," she answered.

"We've got to do it," Lawrence repeated. "It isn't the first night of my life I've struggled against a black so dense its nothingness seemed overpowering."

She strained her eyes through the gathering night to turn him into the smoothest way, lapsing into jerky, habitual words of guidance.

In the darkness, they entered the ravine, and staggered down to its broken bottom. The time soon came when she could hardly see anything until they were almost upon it, and the white face of a boulder spotting the endless black before her filled her with a vague dread. Often they paused to rest, but the cold drove them on again. Claire almost ceased to direct him, and Lawrence gritted his teeth till they hurt him, and forged ahead.

Once he slipped and fell, but got to his feet again and went on. Claire was not injured beyond a few bruises, but she noticed that he limped more than before, and her fear increased.

How they ever fought that night through neither

knew, but morning came at last and found them still staggering down the ravine. They were almost out of it now and were entering a rather heavy pine forest. Fortunately the gulch they followed had turned around the mountain in the direction of the river, and their desire for water drove them to keep on. To their blue and shaking bodies all feeling had grown vague, tingling, and uncertain. When Claire looked at Lawrence she could have screamed. His lips were drawn back, and his hairy cheeks and sightless eyes flashed before her the image of a dehumanised death mask. Her own face must look like that, she thought, and buried her head on his shoulder. Through that morning he struggled on, faltering, lurching, resting a little, girding himself against the death now so surely at hand. In his mind thought had ceased to be coherent; his starved body, whipped by the cold, was beginning to play with his imagery.

He gurgled a grim little laugh, and all clear thought was at an end. Claire heard and looked at him wonderingly. She knew that she was freezing and she had resigned herself, but this man, what was he doing? He still lunged through the trees, where at all events it seemed a little warmer. She heard him muttering incoherent jargon that gradually cleared to speech. "We'll go on, Claire. We'll go on to the end. I've got to do it. I need my life. I need you."

She started and listened, though even in her pres-

ent state she grew resentful. "So that was it," she thought, "he's waiting to get me out before he breaks into his love. He wants his rescue as an argument." Then her thinking was broken into detached images. She saw her husband and cried aloud to him. She had pictures flashing in her mind of him, of old scenes, parties, places they had been together, tenements she had visited in her charity work, the beach that morning when Lawrence had found her, and in and through it all she heard words falling from his lips that, recalled later, stung her to wrath.

"I need you, Claire," she heard him again, and then, "I shall use you, Claire. You will be my masterpiece; it is you, proud, superior, human, social, intellectual, sexed, vital, you, carrying in your being the whole tumultuous riot of the ages gone, and hiding it under a guarded social exterior, not knowing when in a sentence it breaks through, you, you, Claire, you, the woman."

He stumbled, regained his balance, and plunged through a fringe of pines, staggered against one, then another, cursed, and went again forward and out into a clearing. She saw it vaguely before them. At first she doubted, then, as he let his hold on her slip, she gripped his neck with arms that scarcely felt the body they closed around.

"Lawrence," she screamed, in a voice that was shrill, hard, and sharp as the spur to live that prompted it, "Lawrence, a cabin, a cabin!"

He sank down with her clinging to him still. "I know," he muttered, "I've got to find one." Then he lay quiet.

She freed herself and crept toward the house. She was at the back of it, and she was obliged to crawl slowly on hands and knees around to the front. There was a door, she pushed on it, but it did not open. She grew angry at it, and beat against it with her fists, abusing it for its obstinacy. When at last it opened she laughed wildly.

Before her, his tall body clad in warm, heavy clothes, stood a man whose dark eyes grew wet with tears of pity the instant they saw her. He lifted her in his arms like a child, and carried her inside. She had a fleeting sense of being at home, she thought he was her husband and threw her arms around him passionately, then remembering Lawrence, she murmured as he laid her down, "Out there! Behind the cabin!" and was unconscious.

The man turned and hurried out. In a few minutes, he came back, carrying Lawrence, and his face was lined with pity at the state of these two human beings.

He laid them together on a wide berth at the side of the cabin and began to work over them alternately. Swiftly and deftly, he heated blankets and prepared food. He wound them in the hot cloth, chafed their hands and arms, and forced brandy down their throats.

Lawrence's eyelids drew back.

"The man is blind," muttered the stranger in Spanish.

Claire was looking at him, dazedly, and reaching greedily toward the kettle that simmered over a great open fire-place.

He brought a bowl of hot savoury soup, and started feeding them. Lawrence swallowed mechanically, but he could hardly get the spoon out of Claire's mouth.

"Not too much, señora," he said, turning away.

When he looked again toward them they were both asleep. The utter exhaustion of their long night claimed rest. He walked over to Claire, and stood looking down at her.

"She was beautiful," he thought. "And he is blind. Ah, well, for her, beauty is again possible, but for him——" he shrugged his shoulders. "It is bad, bad," he said softly, and turning to a shelf of books that stood against the wall, he drew out a volume and sat down before the fire to read.

CHAPTER VI

THE STONE THREAT

WHEN Claire awoke, she stared around her for a few minutes before the events of their frantic struggle came back to her. Her eyes strayed to the figure before the fire-place. Idly she noted the lustrous, wavy black hair and deep brown eyes protected by unusually heavy lashes. It was clearly the face of a thinker, a dreamer, yet there was something sensual about the mouth, potentially voluptuous, abandoned, and suggestive of tremendous passion that slumbered close beneath the brain that was so actively awake. Claire ached, and her body tingled with the unaccustomed warmth. She lay quiet, looking at the fire, her mind still uncertain in its action, weaving sharp, dynamic images about this new personality. While his appearance gripped and awed her strangely, at the same time she felt drawn to him. She turned and threw out her hand. Her host closed his book, and looked up, smiling.

"Ah, la señora se siente mejor?" His deep, rich voice, although lighter than Lawrence's, was full of music, but she did not understand his words. Her blank expression told him, and he smiled again.

"I remember, you spoke English," he said with only the slightest accent. "Are you better, madam?"

She answered his warm smile, and said weakly, "Much better, thank you."

"And your husband?" Claire saw that he was looking beyond her, and she turned to find Lawrence at her side. Instinctively, she resented his being there. The warm blood rushed to her face.

"He—oh—he will be all right, I trust," she stammered falteringly, and her host looked puzzled. Her impulse was to tell him that Lawrence was not her husband, but she thought better of it and said nothing about the relationship.

"He had a long, desperate struggle to bring me here," she said, instead. "You see, I broke my ankle, and he had to carry me."

"Oh!" The man rose, his face filled with respect as he looked at Lawrence asleep beside her.

"From where did he carry you?" he asked.

"From the coast," she shuddered. "It has been terrible."

His face expressed utter amazement as he repeated, "From the coast! It is a miracle!"

She made no reply, for Lawrence stirred and tried to sit up.

"You'd better lie still," the stranger said kindly. "You deserve rest, my friend." Then, as to himself, he added, "It is the first miracle in which I can believe."

Claire stared at him, and he laughed softly.

"Pardon, madame, I am an unhappy seeker after truth," he apologised, throwing a log on the fire.

For Lawrence and Claire the days that followed were uneventful days of recovery from their hardship. Slowly both of them grew stronger and resumed their normal habits of thought and speech. Their host was a gentle nurse, kindly and considerate. Claire assumed her wonted attitude of the cultured woman, a guest in the house of a friend, and the Spaniard met her with the polished courtesy of a cosmopolitan. Lawrence, too, became the usual man that he was, careless of little niceties, indifferent to form, but a charming companion and a delightful guest.

From the first he and Philip became intensely interested in each other. They discovered early that each was a thinker and a searcher in his own way for the one great truth.

During the first half-hour Claire had demanded of their rescuer where they were and how soon they could get back to civilisation. Philip had laughed gently.

"You are on the borders of Bolivia," he told her, "and the nearest railroad is two hundred miles away. It is impossible to get out until spring. Long ere this snow will have barred the way through the one pass that leads out, and we are prisoners, the three of us. You will have to accept the hospitality of Philip Ortez until the spring."

Lawrence had accepted the verdict with calm indifference.

"Oh, well," he said, "it's hard on you, but as far as I'm concerned, one place is as good as another."

"I shall enjoy your company," their host laughed.

After voicing polite thanks, Claire, in her own thought, had rebelled against the situation vehemently. She wanted to get home, she wanted to get away from everything that suggested her last weeks of suffering, she wanted to get away from these men. Her heart leaped to the ever-recurring dream of the husband, whose arms should take her up and hold her warmly against the memory of their separation.

"Then there is no way out?" she asked again.

"None, madame," and Philip Ortez bowed. "You will have to be the guest of a humble mountaineer."

"I shall enjoy it, I am sure," she answered. "It is simply a woman's natural desire for home which leads me to ask again."

His eyes clouded. Claire somehow found herself fancying a tragic mystery in the life of this man, and then rebuked herself for romancing. Certainly, such fancies were not her habit, and she wondered why they were occurring to her.

The cabin stood on the very edge of the forest through which Lawrence had carried Claire the last morning of their long march. Protected by its pines, the little house fronted on a small lake, a place where the river which they had followed widened to a half mile, and stayed thus with scarcely any cur-

rent save directly through the centre. All around the lake the forest stretched its masked green, and here Philip trapped. The lake, in its turn, provided him with fish.

The week after their arrival, snow had heaped itself into the ravine and piled up high around the cabin. Ice was beginning to form on the edge of the lake, and their host was preparing for his winter's work. They were too weak to go with him, and he left them in possession of the cabin.

At first there had been an unaccountable awkwardness between Lawrence and Claire, and it had left a reserve which was difficult to overcome. Lawrence had explained their situation to Philip; the Spaniard had been apologetically gracious, but there was something in Claire's nature that made her wish that Lawrence had never been thought of as her husband. Dressed in Philip's clothes, and in the presence of a roof and fire, she felt a desire to be free from the memory of the days when she had clung about Lawrence's neck, and, above all, she felt that she was not able to meet him with understanding. His blindness in these surroundings seemed to set a sudden and impassable barrier between them, and made her ill at ease when she was alone with him.

Lawrence was irritated that she should so immediately react into what he called the old conventional habit towards blind people, and keep it standing like a stupid but solid wall between all their talk. Now

that she was no longer dependent on him, she appeared to him more attractive. He thought of her husband, and wondered if Claire's attitude toward himself was tempered with the thought of the man at home. "Surely," he told himself, "she can't be allowing that to come between us, for it is so obviously quite unnecessary." Then he began to wonder how much of her life was centred about her husband. What sort of man was he, and did she love him devotedly? As he thought, there crept into his feeling a sense of irritation against the unknown man who was obstructing his friendship with the woman he had carried half through the Andes mountains.

Then the longing for his work came over him, and there were times when he felt he must do something. He spoke needlessly sharp words to Claire. Though she concealed her anger, there grew between them a continuous straining born out of mutual misunderstanding and a great submerged tangle of emotions.

One morning when Ortez in snow-shoes and fur had gone for the day to look after his traps, Claire washed up the tin dishes they used, and sat down before the fire opposite Lawrence. His head was in his hands, and his face was sombre.

"You look sad this morning," she said, casually.

"Do I?" he answered. "I'm not, especially. I was just planning a piece of work, dreaming it out in outline."

She looked at him, thoughtfully. His forehead was high and broad, she thought, and his hands—— Their days in the wilderness rushed back over her. She was angry at the memories they brought her, and doubly angry at Lawrence, as if he only were responsible.

"It's inconceivable," she said calmly, "that you, without seeing, can really carve anything true to form and line." In her voice was incredulity and unbelief.

He rose suddenly, his face white, and said, with an intensity that startled her, "That sentiment is as familiar to me as my name. I have heard it from sight-bigoted people from the days when I made my first attempt to go back to my school work. I am rather weary of it."

She sat staring at him for a moment, then she laughed. She could not have told why she did it, and she was instantly sorry. The blood rushed to his face.

"I shall create that which will forever assure you that I can carve true to the most familiar form and line you know," he said fiercely.

Her face was as crimson as his now, though she felt ice cold.

"What do you mean?" she demanded, her voice unsteady.

He laughed, bitterly. In his own heart a fierce volcanic surge was raging which he did not attempt to control.

"Do you think that I, trained as I am to gather fact from touch, could carry you through weeks of Hell in my arms, against my breast, and not know you, you as you are, Claire Barkley? I shall carve you, you with your cold reserve suppressing the emotional chaos within you, and you will not fail to recognise yourself."

Claire gripped the chair arms. Anger, fear, doubt, then the knowledge that he could do as he said, swept over her in rapidly succeeding waves and gathered at last into a steel hate that she felt must last through eternity.

"You, you would do that, after I guided you here! You would take advantage of what I could not help, and—and——" She choked, and then said, swiftly, "So, under your indifferent exterior, you used your touch that way those days; oh, you, you beast!"

Lawrence laughed coolly. "I could no more help it than I can avoid being here."

"Lies!" she exclaimed, "a gentleman could help it."

"Perhaps, but not an artist."

"And what of beauty, of your boasted purity of art, is there in that?"

"All," he said calmly. "If you knew, oh, if I could make you see what every artist knows," he was talking passionately now, his face illumined in spite of his blind eyes, "you would realise that I could not help it, that I glory in it, and that it was and is the way of art."

He rose and walked the floor, pouring out his creed in a stream of burning words. "I am a machine, a sensitive thing that registers what it feels and knows, that is all. You touch me, my brain registers that touch, and something in me, the will to live, the desire to create, the insistent shout for expression says, 'Take that and carve it in stone.' If I could see, if I were not blind, I would have been a painter. I would have painted you, almost naked as you were, your eyes filled with the hunger for life, your face tense with racing thoughts; I would have painted you fully, all of you, as you were in night-gown and skirt there in that forest, and you would have shouted to all the world from my canvas, 'Look at me, I am the primitive, the wild, the passionate, the tender, the selfish and unselfish living woman. See me as I am, cultured, refined, educated, elemental withal, and the emblem of humanity as it is, still stained with the traditional mud of superstition and blood that marks its origin.' Oh, I would have painted you so, and now I shall carve you so."

He stopped, and Claire looked at him wildly, her eyes aflame with hate and admiration.

"You would use another human being that way?" she gasped.

"I would use any one, I would, I will, at any cost to them, to me, if the outcome be a piece of art, a work that in its truth, its immortal beauty, shall stand a testimony that I, Lawrence Gordon, have mastered blindness and registered life correctly."

A great light swept over her mind; that was the key to him. He would sacrifice himself to conquer blindness—but would he, she wondered, and instantly her thought found expression.

"Would you crush yourself to create that mastery of blindness?"

He laughed. "I have; I am doing it," he said. "I would go through all the torment of the world if I might create something lasting, true, and beautiful."

Claire leaned forward, her lips apart, her eyes bright. That she hated this man she was sure, yet all her woman's soul was awed by what she now saw behind his mask of blindness. Then a new thought came to her.

"Might it not be," she asked subtly, "if you hold suffering to be the key to beauty that you would profit more at last by denying the impulse to create the thing you are planning?"

He laughed again. "I hold that pain is only the spur to progress. I care nothing for the sentimentalism you are talking now. I carried you through the wilderness, I suffered and bore it, I staggered through nights and days with your warm body against mine that I might live and now, now I know the value of life, I understand as never before the pain our fathers paid. I know the bitter animal war against environment, evolution whipped into action by pain, hunger, fear of death, and I shall carve that, all that, into the statue of one woman."

"And what of me, me and you as such, Claire and Lawrence who were there through that struggle in the wilderness?" The speech leaped from somewhere in her being before she knew it, and with it came knowledge that stung her into tearful self-hate.

"We shall go back to our old lives, I suppose, and live them out."

It was what she had expected him to say, yet the calm matter of fact statement hurt her as nothing he had ever said before.

Lawrence dropped into the arm-chair again, and rested his head on his hand. He was calmer, now, and reviewing in his mind what he had said, he was beginning to ask himself why he had given way to this sudden resentment against Claire. If she doubted him because he was blind, was that any more than others had done? He had never burst out against them. What was the matter with him? He surveyed the whole trend of his life up to this minute: how he had broken at late adolescence from a glowing idealist to a wanderer through varying paths of thought; always he was stirred, stimulated, and swept on by contact with other people, books he had read, women for whom he had occasional fancies of love, until gradually he settled into his assured manner. It was exercise he needed, that and work. He asked himself if he loved Claire, and answered unequivocally that he did not. He wanted her friendship very much, indeed, but love, not at all. If she had been single, perhaps—but no, he did not care

about her that way, that was all. He had been too long shut up here in the cabin with her and without work. He must get some wood and amuse himself carving things with Ortez' knife; it would be good practice, and at the same time relieve his nerves. He was sorry he had let himself go; Claire must not be hurt.

"Claire," he said quietly, "if I wounded you, if I said things I ought not, pardon me. I am getting nervous doing nothing, and I am not myself these days."

She laughed, calmly. "Oh, very well," she said. "I wonder that we don't come to blows, cooped up here as we are. I think next time Philip makes his rounds, I'll go with him."

"It would be a good thing," answered Lawrence; "I'd like it, myself."

Claire did not keep up the talk. She, too, was thinking fast, and facing new problems that demanded her attention. She was surprised to find that her resentment toward Lawrence was completely gone. What would her husband think of him? What would he do when she returned, when she told him of her journey with this blind man through weeks and weeks of wilderness when they were almost naked? She stopped; that was what Lawrence had said, 'almost naked.' Her flesh tingled as she saw the picture which he said he would like to paint of her.

What would she, Claire Barkley, do if such a pic-

ture were painted? She buried her face deep in her hands, but in her heart she knew that she would respect the man who painted it. And if Lawrence carved her so in stone, and did it as he thought he could—she pondered over that for some time. At last she rose and set to straightening things about the cabin.

If he did, she would be glad, and she knew it. What was it that made her feel so? Her husband would have been furious if he had heard Lawrence talk of her in such a manner; he would be furious if he thought she wanted herself carved so. Why would she be glad if Lawrence carried out his threat? She heard the unspoken answer ring in her mind like bells, she wanted Lawrence to succeed, to master blindness, to master beauty, art, and to do it through her, with her help.

She did not really love him—but, after all, wasn't it love to want to share in, to be the subject of and impulse to a man's best work? What was she thinking? How in the world could she love a blind man?

But if she did love him, what then? She thought of him in every situation in which she had seen him, then in the position of host among her friends at home. No, he would not fit there. Her husband was a charming host and her friends liked him. Of course, if she were going to spend the rest of her life in this country—but she was going home to her husband in the spring. All this nonsense was mere folly, the result of her too limited association and

lack of anything to do. She must take to going outdoors, perhaps snow-shoeing or fishing with Philip.

The Spaniard was certainly a gentleman; she loved to hear him talk, and to watch the play of intelligence in his eyes. Was he measuring life as Lawrence did? What was there about him that reminded her of her husband? From the day she had come to his door she had felt something similar, but she could not detect it.

"I think," she said, aloud, and Lawrence raised his head, "that if I were to stay shut up here alone as Philip does, I should go crazy before spring."

"It all depends on how your mind is occupied," he laughed.

She blushed guiltily, and was glad he could not see her face.

CHAPTER VII

PLAYING WITH FIRE

IN the late afternoon, Philip returned to find Lawrence still sitting before the fire, his mind centred on ideas for his future work. Claire had disappeared behind the canvas curtain which was stretched before her bed.

"It is almost Christmas," announced Philip, as he entered.

Lawrence straightened up. "Back again?" he said, carelessly. "It's been a beastly day."

Claire came out from her partition, laughing. "If you don't take one of us with you next time," she said, "I won't answer for the tragedy that may follow."

Philip laughed, and shook the snow from his big coat.

"Too much of your own continuous company?" he asked.

"Yes"—her tone was light, but he saw that she was in earnest—"we are so accustomed to each other that we both need a rest." She drew up a chair for Philip before the fire.

His dark eyes looked searchingly at her.

"If you knew the path to peace," he said, "you

would be happier. I see that I must take you out with me and teach you the hidden entrance to that mystic roadway."

"You know one, then?" Lawrence's voice was amusedly sceptical.

"It lies through the heart of man into the heart of"—Philip paused—"shall I say God?"

"You may as well, though it isn't especially clear." Lawrence smiled. "God is a big but vague term."

"I find it so," Philip answered, seriously. "There are days, however, and this was one of them, when I am sure of the meaning of that term. Claire must go forth with me and see."

"Yes, do let me go," she said eagerly. Then, with a little laugh, "if your mystery out there is as discomforting as the Lawrence mystery in here, I shan't worship him, however."

"He isn't." Philip arose and crossed to his books. "He is the mighty God who speaks in solitude." He drew down a volume, and returned to his chair.

"I find here in these mountains the medicine that Hamlet should have had. He would have been no Hamlet had he ranged this plateau for a day in winter."

"And the world would be the loser," Lawrence interposed.

Claire rose and started to prepare their evening meal. She had taken over the duties of house-keeping from the time her ankle had allowed her to walk.

"If you two are going to plunge the house into an argument such as that one promises to be," she said gaily, "I am going to reinforce the inner man so that at least you won't suffer from physical exhaustion."

Both men laughed, and one of them listened to her thoughtfully as she moved about, while the other watched her, his dark eyes full of a keen appreciation of her grace and her concise, accurate movements.

"How good it is to have her here," thought Philip. Aloud, he said seriously, "I do not think the world gains enough from Hamlet to make it worth the price he paid."

"Why not?" Lawrence was quick to respond. "Whatever his agony, whatever his failures and his death, he left the world a picture of man's heroic struggle to solve the riddle of the universe, his wisdom, his strength—and his weakness."

"But that is just what we don't want—the picture of man's weakness. It is made all the worse when it is presented with the power of a sublime work."

Claire turned from the stove, and looked at Philip. His eyes were burning with a deep, earnest fire that held her fascinated. She thought him the most beautiful of all the men she knew. It was not his face, not his appearance generally, but his eyes. Oh, the loss of such eyes! she thought—yes, they are what makes him a finer man than Lawrence. Why hasn't Lawrence such eyes?

"Believe me, friend," Philip was speaking again, "if I could erase from my knowledge the weakness of man, I would not need to trail my feet through these snow-buried forests to find an hour's rest from life."

Claire saw his fingers move nervously on the arms of his chair, and thought, "That is it, then; I was right; he has his tragedy." She looked at him again, and as she met his eyes she felt that she was sorrier for him than she had ever been for Lawrence. Yes, she was sorrier for this man whose soul burned out of his eyes than for that other whose soul was always curtained by the expressionless mask that hid him.

"I can't quite agree with you," Lawrence was saying; "I, too, know the weakness of man, but there is, nevertheless, the glory of sublime beauty which alone stands immortal. I should indeed mourn for man if he were unable to be truly immortal even in his created work. That, it seems to me, saves him."

"Or loses him," Philip added. "One golden life of unbroken sunshine, dead at last and laid away in the memory of friends, is worth more than your greatest poem."

"I should call that sentimentality," Lawrence laughed.

"So it is," Philip flashed, "and why not? Must we kill sentiment and go about with hearts of ice because our world is hard?"

"Is there no way to keep ourselves warm without poultices?" retorted Lawrence.

Claire sat down at the table. "Come on and enjoy your venison, you two, and have done with the ills of the universe."

The two men joined her. It was a strange trio: Claire, a dashing boy in Philip's made-over corduroys, Lawrence, wearing his host's summer serge as though it were his own, and Philip, looking at them, amusedly.

"I never quite recover from the charm of you in male attire," Ortez remarked, looking into her face.

"I've tried at times since our fortunate misfortune to imagine her in evening gowns and furs," said Lawrence, "but I always fail and end by getting her into some sort of barbaric costume belonging to the distant past."

"You are, both, flattering and, both, foolish," she told them. "It's my business to look well in clothes, you know, and it's masculine to admit my efficiency in a particularly feminine line."

"You were scarcely fascinatingly efficient in the garb in which you first appeared to me." Philip laughed at the recollection.

"That isn't fair. I would have been, if I had had enough to eat."

She looked at him, and her eyes sparkled gaily.

"I surrender," he said. "You would have been. Too fascinating!"

"That, also, depends on circumstances," said Law-

rence. "She wouldn't be fascinatingly efficient in that back-to-nature garb if she were doing charity work at home or if she were taking a trip in an aeroplane."

"You carry your point," she agreed. "I shouldn't care to try."

"Which leads me," Lawrence went on, "to observe that our friend Shakespeare was, after all, right in bequeathing Hamlet to us. He might not look well in our own castle but as a portrait viewed in our neighbour's house, or in a house unspecified, he is the high point of subjective tragedy."

Ortez did not answer for a moment, then he said, quietly, "I had rather lose my winter's work than lose Hamlet from my memory, yet when I think of what there is in life for a man did he not have Hamlet's doubt to face, I think perhaps we would all be better off for no knowledge of that subjective war. Man has too much to do to lift himself out of the still clinging primordial slough to dally with subjectiveness. We should be acting, aggressive, strident in the strength of the war we wage toward freedom."

"Of course," agreed Lawrence, "but that requires only one thing, the master passion to do because for us doing is life. I cannot regret Hamlet's hesitating failure. It was his life. To every man there is but one way, his way, and whether it be failure or success does not depend upon an avenged wrong, a successful marriage, or even a great work done for

humanity. The test is, is his life worth the price he pays to live it? I imagine Hamlet's was."

"Fallacies!" interrupted Claire. "Why, then, the tragedy?"

"Because Hamlet did not know that the governing laws to which he strove to hold himself were not laws, not true, not necessary."

"You mean," Ortez inquired, "that he was not bound to avenge his father and punish his mother?"

"I mean just that. Why should he? She was satisfied, his father was dead, and Hamlet gained nothing by his moral strutting and raving against his own hesitating hand."

"But you have swept aside all moral law," protested Philip.

"What moral law is there that is external to me? What, indeed, is moral law?"

"That which makes for life, perhaps, as some one has said," offered Claire.

"For my life, yes. That which to me means life, is good. That which to me means less life, is bad."

"Yet you carried Claire through the mountains." Philip's voice was hard.

"Because I needed her, because she was essential to my life."

"Then you would have left her, had she been a hindrance?"

"That depends," answered Lawrence slowly. "Had she made my life uncertain when otherwise I might have lived, I think I would. Of course, if

her being there merely increased my trouble, I should have brought her."

Claire was watching Philip's face. It was a study. On it there was something that made her heart beat faster; she found herself unable to tell why. She glanced at Lawrence. There he sat, his strong, stern face calm and soulless. She wondered why blindness robbed this man of his rightful appearance. He had a soul, and it was a wild, beauty-loving soul, she knew, but blindness quite mantled it. On the other hand, Philip's was a mighty fire within that shone in beauty through his eyes. Lawrence had quietly spoken of how he would have left her under other circumstances. Philip would have died at her side, she knew it. What a difference between them!

"But if you feel as you declare, why take that extra trouble to save her?" Philip asked.

"Because I have a certain dislike of death and don't care to cause it myself if I can help it."

"Claire laughed. "But death, you said once, is a mere stopping of animal action. Why dread that?"

"Because I myself do not care to die, I would not care to cause your death."

Philip rose, and went to the fire. "I do not believe you could live by your theory," he asserted.

"I do live by it. There is but one thing I dread worse than death. I would die rather than give up my creative impulse."

"And he would sacrifice your life or mine for art's

sake," merrily added Claire. "It's a good thing he doesn't think we are hindrances to art."

Philip also laughed. "Well," he said, "there might come a time when I, too, would want a thing enough to kill in order to obtain it."

"What, for example?" asked Lawrence. "That is the best way to determine your value of life."

Philip did not answer for a few minutes, then his voice vibrated.

"The things that mean more than life to me. I know that one holds his own life dear, but there are things, love, courage, honour, for example, that he holds even above life."

"Would you kill me, for instance," asked Lawrence pleasantly, "if I stood between you and Claire?"

"That is scarcely answerable," nervously interposed Claire. "You see, you don't, and the man who does—though it's all absurd since we none of us here are the least in love—is my husband."

"I had almost forgotten him," said Lawrence, his voice lingering softly on the word "almost."

Philip laughed. "Why, yes, in the abstract, I should say that if anything would make me kill you, it would be your standing between me and the woman I loved. Of course, the case is fair, but scarcely probable enough to make any of us worry."

"True"—Lawrence joined him at the fire—"and by the way, while I think of it, I want a knife and a

block of soft wood. I'm going to entertain myself these days."

Quickly, Claire looked up.

"And you shall entertain me, Philip," she said gaily.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TIGHTENING NET

CHRISTMAS was upon them. They gathered before the big fire-place in silent meditation, while outside the wind whipped sheeted snow against the walls and wailed dismally its endless journeying. They could not help but feel the something melancholy in the air. The little cabin, standing so far away from civilisation and all the things they were accustomed to know, seemed somehow to set them apart from the rest of the world and leave them stranded, as it were, upon a barren stretch of thought. In keeping with the setting, solemn questions of destiny, death, and the meaning of things took the place of the usual Christmas festival and glitter. Life, with wonted indifference to individual happiness, was steadily weaving about these three its net of fatality. They felt the net drawing closer, and tried, as men often do, to grope their way through the darkness with talk in generalities on all topics except the one that occupied them, as if by so doing they could arrive at a solution without confronting the truth. But their thoughts were not as easily controlled as their speech.

In Lawrence's mind, Claire was growing more and more predominant. He found her constant as-

sociation weaving itself into his life until when he looked ahead toward the day when they must part he discovered himself asking what he could find that would take her place. Her voice, her little habits of speech, the unexpected question that showed her deep interest in him, in his work, and in his attitude toward her, these had gradually stirred in him the desire to establish in his own mind a definite relation toward her which he could maintain.

Claire had gone out for a while with Philip, and Lawrence spent the interim in trying to reason out his problem. He told himself that he would feel differently in his old environment with friends and work, but the answer was not satisfactory. He knew that even there he would miss the quick sound of movement, the quick phrase that was Claire.

Did he love her, then? He asked himself that, and could not answer. What was love to him, anyway? He sought to think out a scheme of love that would fit into his scheme of utter selfishness, and failed. The memory of her in his arms came to him now with a warm, emotional colouring that had been absent during the days of their journey.

Had he been so impersonal then at first? He remembered his first wild joy at finding her there in the surf, and he admitted that even then there had been a subtle heightening of his pleasure because it was a woman. Since his blindness, he had been separated from the other sex even more than from his own, and now he was to live with one daily, having

her alone to talk to, to watch, to be interested in, and to know—yes, that had been a part of his feeling that morning. He remembered that he had been slightly irritated at her when he had first decided that she was cold and intellectual. He had wanted her to be warm, colourful, vivid, and feminine. He had found later that she was all these things, but not toward him. It was a man whom he had never known, her husband, Howard Barkley, for whom she was wholly woman. Always when she spoke of him, her voice had warmed, grown softer, subtly shaded with sound colour.

Claire opened the cabin door.

"Hello, Mr. Dreamer, still in the land of tomorrow," she called, taking off her heavy wraps.

"Where's Philip?" Lawrence demanded gruffly, without moving.

"Working over a trap in the ravine. I was a little tired, so I didn't wait."

Lawrence could hear her brushing her hair. He was glad she had returned without Philip. Now at least they would have a few minutes alone.

"Snow bad?" he asked. If he could only run his hands through that curly mass! The memory of her hair brushing against his face made his temples throb, dully.

"Yes, my hair is filled with it. I caught my cap on a branch, and the whole load of snow came down on top of me."

"How old are you, Claire?" demanded Lawrence suddenly.

She laughed frankly. "Guess! Don't you know it isn't good form to ask a lady her age, my son?"

"Sometimes you are quite thirty, and other times——"

"Well, go on." Claire was standing at the opposite side of the fire-place with her back to the flame.

"Other times, you are two," Lawrence continued calmly.

"I thought that was coming, O fountain of wisdom. Well, just to prove what a really nice person I am, I'll tell you. I'm twenty-six."

"When were you married, Claire?" Her breath tightened at his question.

"Curiosity is a wonderful thing, attorney for the state, and the impudence of man passeth all understanding. But let us have the truth at all costs. I have been married exactly six years, three months, and twenty-four days." The last sentence brought the catch into her voice that Lawrence had expected.

"I know you miss your husband," he forced himself to say formally.

"Yes, you see"—Claire hesitated—"ours wasn't like some marriages one hears about. Howard and I were both very much in love." She realised too late the past tense. Had Lawrence noticed it? "I miss him dreadfully," she added desperately.

Lawrence said nothing. He had noticed Claire's

slip, and the verb had sent him into a thousand realised dreams. The next instant he was cursing himself for a fool. "Fools, all of us," he thought. "Philip, too, warming himself with dreams of Claire." Before the nearness of the Spaniard's personality, Howard Barkley faded into the background. Lawrence reviewed his own position, moodily.

Blind, unable to do the work that Philip did, certainly unable to use the million little ways of courtesy-building as Philip did, his chances were unequal.

Did he want Claire for Claire, or was it only the fighting instinct, the desire to overcome men not handicapped as he was? Would he still want Claire after he had won her, after the intimacies of home life had made her familiar as nothing else could, had dispelled all romance, all the alluring appeal that sprang from the deepest sex-prompted desire yet unattained? That was the question, and he could not say. The experience alone could tell him—and would that experience ever come?

Claire watched Lawrence's face, the while her own thoughts raced on. It had been love she felt for her husband. She was sure of that. Of course, in the years of their life together, the old, wild passion had gradually retired into its normal proportion, leaving them free to go about calmly and untroubled. But it was there, as she well knew, in the hours when they became lovers again. Certainly those hours had been joyous, happy ones, unclouded

by any suspicion of mere gratification of impulse or desire. Yes, they had been hours of love claiming its rightful expression over the more constant hours of daily living.

It was six months since she had left him, and she recalled their parting with poignant clarity. She had loved him, then, but now, did she love him now? There were times when her body ached with the longing for him, and she would cry out over the long miles between them. At first he had been very clear before her mind's eye, but gradually his image was becoming obscure and his features fading into dim outline, while occasionally it was Lawrence's face that sprang into the frame where his should have been. She would shut out the image angrily, and then wonder why it had come. She did not really love Lawrence, but after all he was splendid, fine, strong, and worth while. His appreciation of beauty was amazing. On the rough mantel over the fire-place stood a little wood-carving whose grace, perfection of line, and suggestive quality were witnesses to his power.

But his utter selfishness, could she endure that? In her feeling rather than her thought, she found herself answering that for such a man, a man who was ruthless to himself for the sake of beauty, she was capable of infinite sacrifice. Such sacrifice as she had never made for her husband—and why was that? She, too, was selfish—so much so that it had been her husband who had done the sacrificing, yet

Lawrence was masterful, and would conquer men, his art, her, perhaps, in spite of his blindness.

She recalled her experience of the night before. She had been dreaming of her husband but he possessed Lawrence's features, illumined with the glow of Philip's eyes, and she had started into full wakefulness with a sudden sense of her position. Now she sat before the fire, and resolved grimly that no matter what happened she would be faithful to Howard. Of course, she would go with Philip to look after his traps; the exercise was the best antidote to such morbid thoughts, and he would never make advances to her, of that she was sure. As for the days that she might spend alone with Lawrence, he was too self-centred, too much wrapped up in his wood-carving, to think of a woman—and she disregarded the little pang of discontent that accompanied her thought.

Philip was hanging the skins over the door. Claire realised that she had been too engrossed to notice his entrance.

"I break a six weeks' fast to-day"—and he turned toward Lawrence. "Do you smoke?"

"Man!" said Lawrence, springing up, "if I'd known you had tobacco in store I'd have murdered you long ago to get it. I would be a more agreeable companion if I could taste tobacco now and then."

"Pardon me for not thinking to ask you. I was

declaring a six months' course in self-discipline for the good of my soul."

"Bring forth the smoke," said Lawrence joyously.

"Unfortunately"—Philip turned to Claire—"a bachelor's store-house contains no treat for a lady. Your visit was unexpected."

"I shall gain my pleasure through watching you two sink back into a beloved vice," she answered.

"Horrible!" Lawrence sat down, and took the cigarette which Philip produced. "To enjoy seeing one succumb to vice."

"Isn't it characteristic of scandal-loving humanity?" she rejoined.

"And on Christmas day!" Philip chided her lightly. Then he went on, seriously, "But one should really be above all things save love and gratitude to God on this day."

"I suppose so," said Lawrence, "but it's difficult to determine just where this object of gratitude abides and what He is."

"Is it necessary to locate Him?" asked Claire.

Lawrence breathed deeply with the satisfaction in his cigarette. "I should hate to direct my gratitude toward some one who missed it, and thus have it lost in desert space," he answered.

"It isn't that we need God so much as it is simply the good we gain ourselves," said Philip slowly. "I still follow the old trail for my own heart's sake."

"And does it get you anywhere?" Lawrence's question was characteristic.

"Yes, I think so. I find myself nearer to the source of that which is worth while."

"What is worth while?" Claire asked the question earnestly.

The answers she obtained were the two men revealed.

"The fullest life possible for me," said Lawrence.

"The fullest heart possible for me," followed Philip.

"But you both mean the same thing, don't you?" asked Claire.

"I mean the fullest number of my own desires gratified," Lawrence avowed.

Philip leaned back in his chair, and looked at Claire meditatively.

"If he did as he says, we should have to lock him up," he observed.

They all laughed.

"Not at all," Lawrence was amiably argumentative. "To be sure, if my desires were gratified at your expense, as this smoke, for example"—he laughed—"and on an all-inclusive scale, you might have to resort to personal violence. But in fact many of my desires would bring you joy in their gratification, you know."

"I do know," said Philip cordially, "but the danger in your point of view is that it allows for no check. You would sacrifice both of us if it were

necessary to gratify your desires—that is, if you lived true to your assertion."

"Perhaps I would. I don't know. There is the weak point in my whole scheme. I evade it by failing to sacrifice you, but I support my theory by saying there is no occasion to do so."

"I don't like your principles," Philip rejoined, "though I admit that my own fail more often than not."

"Exactly. We humans do fail, and the conclusion to which it brings me is, why hold principles that you find unworkable? I prefer a standard to which I can at least be true, in the main, and avoid self-condemnation, pricks of conscience, and other little inconveniences."

"Such as a sense of duty?" interrupted Claire.

"That above all, Claire," he laughed.

"And obligation?"

"Yes, that, too, if you mean a sense of being bound to one because of something he has done in the past. For instance, I am obliged to Philip for his food, his house, my life, and this cigarette, but I scarcely feel that that would imply that I must sacrifice my greatest desire in life as payment if necessary. Of course, it isn't necessary, but if it were, I should refuse."

"I think you would not," asserted Philip.

"I know I would. I rather believe you would, also, though it might be that you would not."

"I would sacrifice anything to pay a debt of gratitude." Philip spoke warmly.

"You would—perhaps—but in so doing would you not feel that gratitude was the thing of supreme worth to yourself?"

"Not necessarily. I might even suffer all my life for having done so."

"Impossible. You would either redeem your sense of life's value by a new belief, or you would die."

"Then you think a man can do as he pleases and maintain his self-respect, his personal integrity?"

"He will find some way to make himself feel worth while, or he will cease to be."

"You think that a criminal, or, perhaps better, a person abandoned to vice, feels justified?"

"Yes. He creates a belief by which his abandonment is not destructive to himself, or he is converted, which is simply a convulsion of nature for the same end, to preserve his life and make it seem valuable to him."

"Could you, for instance, murder a man, and do it believing that afterwards you would somehow make it seem right, or at least so necessary that you would feel as self-respecting and sin-free as before?" Philip was speaking earnestly.

"I should not do so unless I were forced to it, but if I were, I know that I would somehow reconstruct my mental life so that I would still feel existence worth the price."

Claire leaned forward. "Lawrence," she said jestingly, "you have swept away the bulwark of the home, made infidelity easy, and numberless separated families inevitable with your bold, bad talk. Aren't you sorry for all those tragedies?"

He laughed. "Very," he said, "though it was watching such proceedings take place so frequently that led me to accept my theory. Think of the men and women who are unfaithful, who leave their wedded partner for another, and still find life worth while."

"But that is their failure to live true to their principles," said Philip. "It is commonly called sin, my friend."

"It may be, according to their light, but they generally get a new light afterward. You see, I do not believe that God joins men and women. I am persuaded that a very natural physical desire does so, and it doesn't follow that the first is the only or best union."

"My husband would simply dread me, if I held your view, and I should feel very wary if I were your wife, Lawrence," remarked Claire.

That was the central point in the whole discussion, though none of them were aware of it. Vaguely they felt that they were groping their way toward the future, but they did not allow the feeling to reach a conscious state, and Philip laughingly broke up the talk. "Here we are," he said, yawning, "the fire is making us all sleepy, we're talking foolish-

ness, and we need exercise. Why not get it? I think we might all of us go out and face the wind for a quarter of an hour, then let it blow us back to camp like three children. I have the skis for us all."

"Great!" Claire clapped her hands in applause.

"It's a splendid idea," agreed Lawrence, and they set forth.

It was hard going against the wind, and Philip was the only one who managed his skis very satisfactorily, but they made great sport of it. The two men placed Claire between them and crossed hands in front of her, like skaters. The fresh snow-filled air blew into their lungs, and they laughed like boys on a holiday. Claire glanced at the two and thought, "What a pair to be between!" then laughed again. All the morbidity was gone, she was not thinking follies now, and neither of them was more than a good friend. Philip was thinking that Claire was good to see as she moved along between them, her graceful stroke carrying her over the snow, her cheeks stung red in the wind. Lawrence was not thinking at all. He was simply moving, deeply enjoying the wind and the exercise and the soft, strong little hand in his own.

When they turned, and stood close together, the wind caught them like a sail and sent them skimming before it. The sense of tobogganing was keenly exhilarating. Home, problems, worries, the future, all seemed very simple, very easy, and not at all a matter for long conversations before a hot fire.

CHAPTER IX

CLAIRE'S ABASEMENT

THE following days and even weeks passed quickly, carried on the wave of light-hearted play which Philip had so wisely started that Christmas night. February came with clear sun that set the snow glittering like a field of crystal under the dark pines, and they laughed with exuberance of spirit as they swept over it on their skis. All speculation was gone, for the time being, from the minds of Lawrence and Claire. They gave themselves up to a frank comradeship in which Philip formed a splendid third, so that they seemed a trio of happy, healthy animals whose lives flowed without a break in the mere pleasure of living.

But one morning early in the month, Philip said after breakfast, over his coffee and cigarette, "I'm going for the day to my farthest traps across the river. Claire, would you care to go? We'll get back late this evening."

"I would," she said promptly. "I'll be ready in a few minutes."

Lawrence did not say anything, but to his sudden surprise, he felt his heart sink. An insistent inner voice was saying, "I wish she wouldn't go."

He heard her, back of the curtain, dressing for

the trip, and his little petulant thought grew into gloom at the prospect of her being away. He felt irritated at Philip for suggesting that she go.

"You'll have to leave me a good spread, Claire," he said, finally, when she emerged into the room.

"I'll fix you up a great meal," she laughed. "You can eat all day, if you like." In her voice there was an unusual warmth, for, at his words, she felt suddenly as though she had been thoughtless of him in going. For a minute, she pondered giving up the trip, then concluded that to do so would seem ridiculous, and set about preparing his lunch.

Philip rose, and putting on his heavy coat, said carelessly, "You can carve us a new wooden image, Lawrence."

The words were casual, thoughtless, without intention, but they angered. Lawrence felt as though both of them were trying to make amends to him for their going, as though, being blind, he must of course stay at home but ought to have something to occupy his time. His resentment grew stronger as he continued to think of their supposed condescension.

When the lunches were ready, Claire and Philip started. At the door, she paused and said gaily, "Keep the house warm for our returning, Lawrence."

He was sullenly angry, and made no reply. The frank way in which she spoke of herself and Philip somehow recalled to his mind other couples, mar-

ried lovers starting out somewhere, and his heart tightened perceptibly. After they were gone, he sat, thinking, for a long time, and his impulsive feeling clarified into certainty. Claire and Philip were in love. Perhaps they did not know it yet themselves and had not spoken, perhaps they had, at any rate they were in love. It had grown between them in his very presence, and he, doubly blind fool, had not known. If he could have seen, it would have been clear to him, of course.

He thought of Claire's husband, and grew virtuously angry at Claire. Howard Barkley would mourn his days out never knowing that his beloved wife was living in Bolivia with a Spanish trapper! He saw Claire going about the cabin as Philip's wife and doing for love the things she now did out of a desire to be of use, and his rage grew. Was it not for love that she did them now? But she was just as thoughtful of him as she was of Philip. "Of course, idiot," he muttered, "she pities you, you poor, abandoned blind man, you are to be cared for, don't you see?" He strove to shake himself into a different mood by self-ridicule. Was this the philosopher who made life a matter of calm acceptance of circumstances which he knew to be his master? He laughed at himself, but the laugh was bitter, and he knew that he was not willing to accept this particular turn of circumstances.

But what right had he to judge what she did? She was not his wife nor the woman who would be

his wife. She could never be his wife. There was her husband. No, it was not her husband that counted, but Philip! Suddenly Lawrence realised the point that he had reached. He loved Claire Barkley.

The admission of that at last in frank, utter avowal set him dreaming of the joys she might have been to him. He thought of a thousand little intimacies, cares, thoughtfulnesses that she might have given him and received from him, and they were all made vital, real, by the now ardent memory of her in his arms, of the hands he had held in his own so often of late in the open.

In the afternoon, he grew disgusted with himself. He had moped all day in his chair, moving only to replenish the fire or get a cigarette, and he now shook himself vigorously free from his thoughts. "You love her, yes, and she obviously does not love you," he told himself. "Why, then, make the best of it, if you can't do better, and at least don't be a beast in your treatment of your host when he comes back to his own hearth." With that he dragged out a block of wood, took his knife, and went to work. As was his way, he was soon unconscious of everything but the piece of wood beneath his hand. He had never done wood-carving before, and he was learning the technique that made it very different from clay. He had gone at this piece without any special intent and was shaping it into a cherub merely out of whim, but he was giving to the task

every atom of his skill, and his hands worked with every nerve strained to detect and keep line and proportion.

Swiftly under his knife the child's body grew in shape, and he caressed the rough form tenderly. He would polish it later and then what pleasure it would represent! It would make a great decoration for the cabin, for her cabin—he winced—yes, for hers and Philip's cabin. "Fool!" he ejaculated, "forget it!" He bent again to his work, but it did not go so smoothly. Out there, she and Philip would be laughing merrily together, skimming over the snow in long, sweeping strides hand in hand. Would they think of him? Probably not, or if they did it would be to say, "Poor Lawrence! It's a pity he's blind. He has real talent."

He gritted his teeth. Well, he had real talent, and they should know it. She should know it. He would show her such carving as she had never thought possible. After all, what was her love to him, Lawrence the artist, the capable, blindness-conquering artist? "I am reconstructing my life," he thought, "so that I can still find it valuable without the woman I want." He again laughed bitterly and said to himself, "You poor, blind, grovelling beast, you, what a poor excuse for life you have, and what a tawdry substitute you would offer Claire for the vast joy that is hers! Oh, it is contemptible!"

He bent over his work again, and the door opened. Claire came across the room and leaned over him,

her body radiating a cool, healthy perfume, as she laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Oh, what a splendid piece of work, Lawrence!"

Her voice was joyous, triumphant, and his heart beat desperately against his chest. "They've declared their love," he thought, then he said simply, his voice vibrant with the emotion he did not otherwise show, "It's been beastly lonesome to-day, Claire."

She laughed gaily, while her eyes clouded. Then she noticed the untouched food on the table.

"Why, Lawrence, didn't you like the lunch I fixed for you?"

"It was bully, Claire," he answered quickly, "but I wasn't very hungry to-day—I don't know why."

The emotional colouring in his voice set her whole being a-tremble. She had come in, radiant with the day's pleasure, and he had met her with his need. He had been too blue even to eat. She was suddenly seized with pity for him, as she thought of his long day alone. But more than that, over and over in her heart she kept saying, with a joy she could not conceal from herself, "He loves me! He loves me!"

Philip came in and bent over them both to look at the wooden child.

"Caramba! it is a marvellous thing!" he exclaimed. The unconscious use of the Spanish word showed the genuineness of his admiration.

Claire laughed joyously. She was glad that Philip knew the power of this blind man who loved her,

and a vague feeling came over her that she was now somehow safe from Philip. Instantly, she wondered at her feeling the need of safety from him. Glancing back over Lawrence's head, she met Ortez' eyes and read in their look a tenderness that he did not know was there. Her heart leaped unsteadily, and her lashes dropped. She was saying to herself, "How wonderful he is!"

Then she turned and almost ran behind the curtain that walled her room. On the edge of her bed she sat, her face in her hands, hot tears burning her eyes, while over and over the blood rushed into her cheeks and out again.

"Claire! Claire! What sort of a woman are you?" she moaned.

Her heart still beat irregularly under the surge of emotion that shook her. She was glad, glad that Lawrence loved her. She had looked into the eyes of Philip Ortez and her own had dropped, while her mind had leaped into admiration of him, warm, yielding admiration. What was it that had swept her on the discovery of one man's love to a deep, vibrant gladness that another man's eyes had been filled with tenderness for her? Was she so changed from the Claire of old? Was she utterly degraded? Did she want both men to love her? Did she love either of them? What of her husband? She sank down on the bed and wept silently.

Her husband—oh, what was she that she should rejoice over the love of these men, when at home he,

the man to whom she owed everything, to whom she had given everything, was aching his days away for the woman he valued more than all else in life! He had told her once that her love was his guiding star, and that nothing could alter it, he was sure. She had been sure, too, and yet, here she was trembling at the glance of this Spaniard's eyes while her heart sang for the joy in another man's love. She was shaken with great choking sobs, lost in the overwhelming tide of self-contempt that engulfed her.

What cruel whim of fate had ever thrown her high in these dreadful mountains? She tried to reason out the things that had brought her to such a state. She sought everywhere among the memories of the past months, and settled first on one thing, then another, which had forced her into this chaos. Again and again she tried to establish the chain of circumstances that had woven themselves into the snare that gripped her, but she did not succeed. What thing was she, that could love so well a husband, and yet love this blind man? And—no, she did not love Philip, she did not, she would not! Lawrence would hate her if he knew that even while her hand rested on his shoulder she had trembled before Philip. Philip would hate her, she hated herself. What a thing of impulse, desire, gross matter she was!

They were talking out there in the cabin. She heard Lawrence say, laughingly, "One gets accustomed to hearing your voices around, and to hear-

ing Claire do things, so that a day alone seems endless."

"Hearing Claire do things"—that was it—and suppose he knew what she was, would he want to hear her, then?

"Oh, I know," Philip was answering. "It gets to be a sort of necessity, doesn't it, when we have so many associations and memories, all among ourselves? I shall find the place dreary next winter, I am afraid, when you are back among your friends, and Claire"—he paused slightly—"will be going about as ever, doing things for her husband somewhere up there in the States."

Would her husband ever imagine or discover what she was? If he did, he would leave her. She remembered a girl in the slums at home who had refused to be uplifted. "Aw, one fellow ain't enough. A plain ham is all right for some, but I want a club sandwich." She shuddered now at the memory of the girl's words, and shrank together on her bed. Was she another of that sort, abnormal, degenerate, whose life must find its level at last in the sordid riot of promiscuity disguising itself as love? If Claire had never touched the bedrock of self abasement before, she was doing it now, there in that cabin.

A thousand thoughts rushed helter-shelter through her mind, and each left her less confident of her strength of soul, less sure of her character, less certain that she was a virtuous woman. All pride in

her life of fidelity was gone. She had been faithful because there was no temptation, no occasion to be otherwise. Here, in a few short months away from her husband she had stumbled upon her real self, a self which, while it still wanted that husband and longed for him, could and did love another man. Yes, and worse, there was Philip.

She heard Ortez starting to get supper, and she sat up quickly. With stern control she forced herself to seem composed and quiet, while, within, her passions raged like a tornado. Self-contempt, wonder, amazement, pity for her husband, for Lawrence, and hatred for Philip Ortez swept round and round in her brain, like a maelstrom.

She stepped through her curtain and said gaily, "You're pre-empting my privilege, Philip."

He laughed. "I thought perhaps you were tired," he said.

"She ought to be," remarked Lawrence from his chair, and in her present state she imagined in his voice a tenderness, a worry for her, and a distrust of her.

She took up the kettle, and hung it on its hook in the fire-place. "I never in my life imagined myself cooking over an open fire this way," she said, as she turned toward the little store-room adjoining.

"You like it?" Philip asked carelessly. She felt sure that his eyes had read her heart and that he was looking toward the future, his future with the wanton mistress he had found.

She could have screamed, "I hate you! I hate you!" but she said only, "It's great fun for a while; I wouldn't fancy it as a permanent thing."

"It surely must be different from the conveniences of your home."

"Rather," she laughed, as she began cutting from the smoked meat that hung in the store-room.

Now it was Lawrence who was speaking. "I guess she'd surprise us if we could supply her with a chafing dish. I'd like to see her at work over one in my studio with the bunch around, waiting hungrily for results."

Would these men never stop saying things that made her want to scream! What was the matter, that all at once the beauty of her day should be smashed into a discoloured memory of self-hatred? Was there nothing in all the world but sordid thoughts of one's self and of men who, causing them, said things to make them worse?

After they had eaten, she went to bed as soon as possible, leaving the men to smoke before the fire. She had pleaded weariness, and they had laughingly told her to get to sleep. They were out there now, talking in subdued tones so as not to disturb her—as if their voices did not ring through her suffering mind like clarions of evil! What would they say if she should suddenly spring before them and shout out her mad fancies? For a moment, she had the wildest of impulses to laugh aloud, then suddenly she turned on her face as she recalled the emotion

that had swept her when she saw Philip looking at her over Lawrence's head. Sleep finally stopped her tears.

The two men went to bed, and there was silence in the cabin. Lawrence was smiling as he felt Philip's body there beside him in the darkness. "I could kill you now," he was thinking, ironically, "and end all question of your loving Claire."

Philip, too, was awake. He had seen the hot flush that came into Claire's face that evening, and he knew that she had been troubled during the supper. He wondered if she were ill. Then, suddenly, he asked himself, "Is she in love with one of us?" He immediately tried to dismiss the thought as unworthy of her. She was not the kind of woman to forget her marriage vows. But what a home she could make for the man she loved! If he had only known her in time!

But there was still friendship—yes, surely she could give that. Complete understanding and perfect sympathy would be the basis of a lasting attachment. "Who knows?" he pondered. "It may be that fate has sent her to me to teach me what a great self-denying love can be. In Claire I may find my dream star again."

CHAPTER X

HOW SIMPLE THE SOLUTION!

WHEN Claire awoke the next morning, her whole being seemed gathered into a tense strain that made her feel as though the least thing might snap the taut nerves in her body and leave her broken and stranded on some far emotional shoal. Her heart beat unevenly, while her lips and hands felt dry and hot, as if she had spent hours in a desert wind. She did not experience the bitter anguish of the night before, such storms are too wild to last, but it had left her deadly heavy within, and she was unable to recover her usual calm. One great determination dominated her, to prevent these men, at any cost, from knowing her real feelings. It was a determination born out of the sheer force that was carrying her on, a struggle that came from the very strength of the tide she sought to resist.

She had been awakened by a sudden and clear image, the result of her unsettled mind. Her husband was beside her, leaning over the bed and looking down at her with a great love and a greater pity shining in his eyes. She thought that she had thrown up her arms to close about him with the frantic joy

of a rescued person, only to have them meet in empty air and fall listless at her sides again.

Beyond the curtain, she heard Philip saying cheerfully, "It is a great day outside, one of Claire's days for play."

"Good!" Lawrence answered. "We'll go out, then, and play."

A rush of self-pity, anger against her situation, fear of she knew not what, and a gnawing desire to escape blended in her thoughts, while her heart warmed at the sound of Lawrence's words.

"Oh," she thought, "I can never, never stand this day!"

She got out of bed and began to dress, her nervous hands fumbling at the buttons on her clothes. Her eyes, deeper and shadowed in dark rings, stared vacantly at the white canvas before her. Lawrence was talking again, and she listened. Presently he started across the room and bumped into a chair. The incident was one which had become long familiar to her, and ordinarily she would have thought nothing of it, but this morning she flashed with sudden anger that a chair should have been left in his way. Then she realised that she was foolish, stepped through the curtain, and said before she thought, "Lawrence, I do wish that you'd look where you are going!"

He laughed merrily. "So do I," he rejoined. "For some years failure to do so has kept me with

at least one skinned shin. But just think of the cost of stockings had I been blind as a boy!"

Suddenly she had a vivid picture of him as a ragged little fellow, stumbling about through his unfathomable darkness, bumping into things and leaving jagged holes in his child's black stockings. Whether she wanted to laugh or cry she did not know, but a great warm surge of motherliness came over her for the child she imaged, and she said aloud, "Poor little urchin!"

Philip turned and looked at her, smiling, "It would have been a picture, indeed," he said.

"I had enough troubles during my rebellious childhood at the orphanage without adding imaginary woes," Lawrence went on, amusedly retrospective. "I remember one day, when I was at the awkward stage. I was all dressed for church and happened to stumble over another boy lying in the grass. I fell against a bench, my trousers caught on a projecting nail and ripped dreadfully. The matron gave me a scolding and sent me to bed for the day."

"Brought up in an orphanage!" thought Claire. "No wonder he is pessimistic."

"I didn't mind missing church," Lawrence continued, "but it struck me as a piece of gross injustice that I should be punished for a boy's lack of muscular co-ordination. I've experienced the same fate over my blindness. It seems to be a special trick people have, and they play it incessantly. I

should think it would get as tiresome to them by and by as it did to me some years ago."

Claire felt as if she were included in his casual criticism of mankind, and wondered just how she had been addicted to the practice. A dozen different instances came to her, and she felt very penitent.

"It's because we're all so thoughtless," she said.

"Perhaps. I rather choose to state it differently. It's for the same reason that I do thousands of things, because I'm more interested in myself than I am in any one else. I'm selfish, and so is the rest of humanity."

"But we aren't deliberately so," Philip protested. "Isn't it rather that we are short-sighted and unimaginative?"

"It may be. The end is the same. If I am too short-sighted, too unimaginative to know how a fellow-being feels, I can do nothing but blunder along. He may be hurt by me. I may do him an injustice, I may even cheat him of his chance at life, but it can't be helped, and again the result amounts to my being selfish."

As she worked over her biscuit dough, Claire listened to their talk resentfully. She wished they would keep still, but she said nothing. They went ahead, demonstrating, she thought bitterly, the truth of Lawrence's argument.

"I suppose mankind generally does the best it can," Philip said thoughtfully. "If you ask a man, if you really talk with him, you will find him kindly,

inclined to be generous, and willing to do what he can for another. I have always found that true."

"So have I, in a way. He is kindly, he is inclined to be generous, and he is willing to do what he can for another. The trouble is, he makes a maudlin sentiment of his kindliness, a self-flattering charity of his generous inclinations, and is unable to do what he can for another because he is quite sincerely persuaded that he can't do anything."

"My friend, I have had men help me when it cost them trouble to do it. We all have. Without it, we would none of us accomplish anything of value."

"I, too, have had them help me, from the lending of money down to guiding me across a traffic-blurred street, but I have never yet found more than three or four whose imagination was keen enough and whose judgment clear enough to give me a square deal at living."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the same man who will help me across the street, lend me money, and be a splendid comrade stops short when he comes to the field of self-support. He will say sympathetically, 'I don't see how you can do it,' or 'I admire your grit, old man, and I'd like to see you do it,' and then begin scheming around to direct my interests, aspirations, and efforts into some other channel from where I want them, as though out of his own great wisdom, he knew much better than I what a blind man could

do. If you want to learn just how small the imagination of mankind is and how obstructive to progress is their fool good-heartedness, go among them as a capable mind with a physical handicap. You'll size them up, yourself included, as the most blindly wall-butting set of blundering organisms that ever felt their way through an endlessly obstructed universe."

"Breakfast!" Claire broke in, with an unwonted sharpness in her voice. "And do let the biscuits stop the argument."

They laughed and sat down to a silent meal. When it was ended and the men took their cigarettes to the fire-place, she said, "I wish you would both do me a favour to-day."

"We will!" "Name it!" They spoke at the same time.

She turned toward them with an earnestness which she had scarcely meant to betray.

"Go out, both of you, and leave me here alone a while."

Lawrence was silent. Her words and her tone sent a sharp pain through him, and he wondered if she were ill. He wanted to say something to her, started to do so, checked himself, and laughed embarrassedly.

Philip stared at her. He noticed the pale face and the dark rings under her eyes.

"Why, certainly," he said, and rose. "You aren't looking well, Claire. Is anything seriously wrong?"

He looked at her again with the same unconsciously tender warmth in his eyes.

She saw it, flushed angrily, wanted to scream at him, and said simply, "No, I just want to think and want it quiet. You two talk too much about yourselves and about things that you don't in the least understand."

"Very true"—Lawrence also had risen—"if I did understand them, I'd show humanity how to stop being animals and be men."

"While as it is," she said nervously, "you allow them to blunder along and help the good work out by making plenty of trouble for them by your own blind shortness of vision."

He stood, wondering at her. How had he unintentionally hurt her, and what exactly did she mean?

Philip laughed heartily. "A just judgment on him for his sorry view of the world," he commented, opening the door.

"We'll tramp back into the hills," he said to Lawrence when they were both outside, "and see what there is of deficient imagination in them."

"There isn't," Lawrence said quietly; "they and the ocean are testimonials to the real potential power of an otherwise very faulty artist."

Left alone, Claire worked furiously at setting the house to rights. Her nervous state led her to throw herself into the work with an energy that kept her from thinking. She sought for things to do with

the desperation of a person whose only escape from the furies that follow him is utter physical exhaustion. When the cabin had been arranged and rearranged until there was no possible excuse for further effort, she took her heavy man's coat from its place and stepped out upon the snow-covered plateau before the house. Along its edges the lake shone milk-white in the sun, while farther out the ice glinted a clear watery blue that made a gleaming jewel set in the sparkling snow around it. She stood gazing across the ice to the forest beyond. Its still beauty crept over her, and she breathed deeply of the cold, crisp air. Her head ached dully, and her chest felt tight as though trying to expand beyond its limit to make room for the trouble that filled her being. After standing motionless for a few moments, she started briskly across the snow toward the far side of the lake. She walked carefully over the ice and into the trees beyond. In her mind was one thought, to escape—but escape from what? From herself, she answered, and then, suddenly, with a panicky bursting of the tension, she thought, that is done only through death.

She stopped and let the word "death" fill her mind, as a word sometimes does, growing and growing till its increasing weight oppresses the brain with a sense of physical pressure. "Death"—is it an escape? She tried to imagine herself dead, and failed. She could find no adequate image to express oblivion and she gave up trying, while she

began to wonder if she actually were immortal and if she were, what would she say to herself beyond the edge of life?

She thought of herself as standing, naked of soul, unbodied, in some far etherealised atmosphere, and she shuddered. "I would still be Claire, loving these two men and fearing a third." Tears crept down her cheeks. No, she did not want to be immortal and have no escape from herself.

If she would only be able to endure the months still remaining before she got home, then everything would be settled. But would it? Did she want Lawrence to go out of her life, did she want to lose him? She could have him still as a friend, her home open to him always, her husband as glad to welcome him as she, herself—yes, that would be best.

She was walking again now, rapidly, thinking as she moved, and it all seemed very clear to her. She would tell her husband how Lawrence had suffered, how brave he had been, and how he had carried her on and on when death seemed inevitable. Howard would owe Lawrence a tremendous debt of gratitude, and would make existence easier for him. Lawrence had had a hard life, his bitter attitude showed that, he deserved a less obstructed road, and she could give it to him. In their home all three would talk, laugh, and be, oh, so happy, while Lawrence could work better with his studio near her, perhaps in her own house where care could be taken of him.

He would create great art there, and his bitterness would end. She would show him that her husband was understanding and imaginative. Again she stopped, suddenly.

But Lawrence—would he accept? He was so independent, so doggedly determined to fight his life out while his very battling made him ironical and darkly pessimistic. She tried to imagine him agreeing to her plan, and instead she heard him say, "I'm sorry, Claire, but I can't do it. I've got to go it alone and win or go under. I can't accept the charity you offer me in place of love. Gratitude, I know, prompts you, but you owe me nothing; you paid your debt by being eyes for me. No, if we can't be lovers, we can't be anything else. I know my limitations."

But it wouldn't be charity, she thought; couldn't he see that? Or, he would see it, but he would call it that just the same because he always called things by their ugliest names. When dealing with human limitations he was so utterly a hard materialist who saw life as an endless struggle or a blundering set of impulses which were not themselves really bad.

Why had she put in that about "lovers"? He had never said anything to lead her to think he would say that. She answered herself that it was because she would want him to say it. And if he did say it, what would she answer? She would say—no, she couldn't do that—she would want to say, "Then let us be lovers!" But that was impos-

sible. In her own husband's home! Impossible and horrible!

And what would she think of Philip when she was again in her old world? He, also, was deserving of gratitude. She stamped her foot in the snow. She hated him, hated him, and he would drop out of her life, utterly and forever. She would be glad when she saw the last of him with his seductive eyes. Those eyes—why did he, and not Lawrence, have them? They should have been Lawrence's. It was one more instance of the endless ironic humour of the universe.

Yes, she hated Philip, and she would let him know it if he ever looked at her again as he had done lately. At best he must be utterly sordid or he would know that she, Claire Barkley, was above stooping to share in any love that he might offer. She would let him know that he was unspeakable to have imagined such a thing of her. If Lawrence knew, he would kill the man for very anger at his uncleanness.

Lawrence—Lawrence and her husband! She turned wearily back toward the cabin.

It was nearly noon when she reached home again, and Lawrence, a worried look on his face, was standing in the door of the cabin.

"You beat me back," Claire said, as she approached, and her heart leaped at the look of relief that came into his face.

"Claire, you ought to be punished," he said in gay, tender tones.

"What sentence would you pass, Mr. Judge?" she questioned.

He stepped out toward her.

"Perhaps your face needs a good washing in cold snow," he laughed.

"Perhaps it does," she said caressingly. "Do you think you could administer it?"

"I know I could."

He stooped and took up a handful of snow.

She did the same and said, gaily, "Two washed faces seem inevitable."

Lawrence laughed, and caught her around the waist. Her blood tingled, and her throat hurt as if she would choke. She began to struggle desperately, frightened at her own emotion. He laughed, and held her tighter with one arm while he tried to reach her face with the other hand. She was pressed against him, and they swayed back and forth, while Philip laughed from the doorway. Her heart was beating trip-hammer blows against her breast, she gasped for breath, and her eyes closed. His hand reached her face, and she ducked against his shoulder.

"Lawrence! Lawrence!" she sobbed. Her voice startled him. Its pleading, yielding intensity sent his own blood racing. He let her go, and stepped back quickly while his breath came short.

"Pardon me, Claire," he muttered, and turned away.

Claire saw Philip watching them, in his eyes a

strange new glitter. She rushed past him to the cabin and into her little room.

It was a silent dinner they ate that day.

Claire was deeply, bitterly humiliated, and she kept seeing again and again with exaggerated clearness that look in Philip's eyes when she had staggered free from Lawrence's arms. It burned in her mind like an unquenchable coal, and she revolted at it. She was utterly unable to collect her thoughts. She fancied she could still feel the warm pressure of Lawrence's body while she suffered untold agony of soul for having been carried away by his touch. She reproached herself with a scorn that seared for having ever allowed herself to engage in that silly scuffle.

She could scarcely bear to sit at the table with Philip, and she did not once look in his direction. In her heart there was no anger against Lawrence, only a dull, aching dread, tempered with a longing she did not attempt to analyse.

Dominating her thought was the one resentful phrase, "Why need Philip have seen?"

That look in his eyes—— O God! would she have to go on day after day facing those eyes that compelled her in spite of herself? Must she feel his glances burning through her when her soul was filled with hatred for him? But was it hatred? Surely his eyes, those lights that made her marvel, were the windows to a high and noble soul. Yes, he was fine, yet she wished he was not there, that

she had never known him. She asked herself if she would rather have perished, and she knew she would not. Better to have lived forever with Philip's eyes piercing into her than to give up life when Lawrence was with her, needing her, and she stopped—loving her, yes, loving her. It was true. She remembered his voice when he had released her, and thrilled again at the tense note.

He did love her,—and Philip? She felt her heart sink, and then a strange, subtle warmth came over her. It was good to be loved by two men so powerful, so worth while, each in his own way.

Of course, she could never care for Philip. He was beyond her power to love; besides, her heart was filled with Lawrence. But her husband, yes, she had loved her husband. Her many days of happiness with him proved that. She could never have lived with him as she had if love had not been between them. She must remember that, and be true to him. It would be hard to see Lawrence go out of her life, but it was her duty, she owed it to herself, to her husband, and to society.

If she could only get through the remaining months without allowing Lawrence to hope! She must not give him another opportunity to want her or to discuss his feelings with her. She would be very, very careful.

He was sitting there now, silent, his forehead gathered into a frown. She knew he was thinking hard; was it about her? She was to blame for his

hoping and his thinking; she would not permit it to happen again. Indeed she would make him understand that there was no love possible between them; at least, that they must not allow any to be.

He was strong-willed and determined; if she explained to him and made him understand, he would fight his love to death and make it easier for her. Could she do as much? She was afraid she could not,—but that was her price, the great sacrificial, purifying thing in her life. She would go back to her husband and make him happy!

She must plan it as easily for Lawrence as possible. The way to accomplish that was not to be with him. This would necessitate her associating more with Philip. After all, why shouldn't she? He was good and strong, and not really in love with her. Of course, he might be, if she allowed it, but she would stop that. She would show him by word, look, and act that any such love was inconceivable. She did not dislike him; it was merely the natural unconscious trend of male and female that she hated. Neither of them was to blame, and they were fortunately beings with mind and will. They could use their God-given power to talk it out and face the situation. They could reach a splendid footing of frank understanding.

In these mountains she would have found two real friends and a higher ground of life. After the first painful talk with Philip they would go out from the cabin, warm comrades, with nothing to regret.

CHAPTER XI

THE MAKING OF A KNIGHT-ERRANT

SILENTLY, Lawrence rose and went to his work-chair. The zeal with which he began to cut his wood showed, more clearly than any of them quite knew, the turbulent state of his mind. He was carried far into speculative possibilities that shook him with their power. He was absolutely in love with Claire, that was undoubted. He knew it, and he was determined to tell her so. To continue living in this uncertainty, with the memory of her pressed against him always compelling him to put out his arms and draw her again to himself, was intolerable. He would speak, and settle it once for all, nor would he take any compromising negative as a reply. That tone she had used could indicate but one thing, she loved him, and whether she knew it or not, whether she wanted to know it or not, should not matter. He would argue it out with her, showing her with the inexorable logic back of their whole experience how she was his, his in spite of her husband, in spite of blindness, in spite of everything. Without her, life was useless, barren, and dead. He must have her!

He carved viciously but accurately, while his mind

and body yearned toward the hour when she would be in his arms, yielding, abandoned, loving.

Claire watched him from her place at the table in calmness of mind that, following her day of tumult, she could not understand. Peace, the peace that comes when one thinks he has settled something forever, was hers.

"Philip," she said, quietly, looking straight into his eyes, "our artist has buried himself in his work. Shall we go forth on a chance adventure?"

Lawrence choked back the whirl of jealous suspicion that swept to his lips, and said from his corner, "Do! I'll have a surprise for your return."

He wanted to say, "No, stay here, Claire. I wish to tell you something, to make you see that I love you, that this Philip is not for you, that he is outside our real lives," but his tongue refused to obey his will.

"It sounds inviting," said Philip, rising. "Suppose we do."

They were gone.

Lawrence worked savagely, his mind grasping at impossible thoughts which kept struggling for expression. He was afraid, afraid till it chilled him, lest, after all, she loved Philip. If her voice had sounded so intense that noon, it had been because she resented his holding her while her real lover looked on.

Meanwhile Claire and Philip tramped through the pines in silence. She was wondering why she

had come. She hesitated before speaking to him as she had determined. Perhaps he would be hurt at her imagining he could think of making any advances to a married woman, he would feel that she had suspected and accused him of a thing of which he was incapable.

Speech was difficult, so she trudged along, feeling very uncomfortable. Her heart ached as she saw again the lonely look on Lawrence's face bending over his work back there in the cabin.

"The adventure is slow in coming," Philip said, genially.

"Perhaps we don't know how to find it," she answered, not heeding her words especially. "To find adventure, one must be awake to possibilities."

"True," he mused, looking at her. "So much depends on a man's experience, knowledge, and imagination."

"I suppose life itself may set us, even calmly walking here, in the heart of an adventure."

"I have no doubt it does," he said, suddenly serious.

Claire looked at him in faint alarm.

"Why," she stammered, "I didn't imagine it was true when I spoke."

"To him who has faith the wildest dreams are always possibilities."

"Do you believe that, Philip?"

"I have found it to be quite true. I often dreamed of good company here in my wilderness and a

charming woman about my cabin; it has happened."

"But even that has its very strong drawbacks, hasn't it?"

"What, for example?" He looked at her, earnestly.

"Oh"—she hesitated, laughed, and said, "the rapidly depleted food supply, your time for thought broken, and all the rest."

"One sometimes finds a relief from thought very agreeable."

She wanted to laugh at the force with which his words struck her. "I am sure that depends on the thought, as Lawrence would say," she answered, smiling.

"It does. And there is nothing I would not give to escape from my present thoughts." His voice was pitched low.

Her heart failed her, but she said bravely, "Perhaps you need a confessor, Sir Philip."

"I do, a gracious one, who can listen well."

"Then a woman would never serve," Claire laughed. "She would want to talk, you know."

Philip stopped, and looked at her. As far as he could see, she was calm, indifferent, the lady making talk.

"Perhaps," he said, lightly. "They have that reputation, I know."

"Now, I"—she laughed—"I, also, need a confessor."

"You?" His look searched her, incredulously.

"What in the name of all the saints have you to confess?"

"Oh! Many things. Misunderstandings, social follies, mistakes in character reading, mean thoughts, lots of things."

"Absurd!" His tone was amused. "Who of us is not a sinner in those things?"

"But suppose," she ventured, hesitant, "suppose I had misjudged you? Suppose I had suspected you of things you were not at all guilty of?"

"I should be sorry if you told me of them."

It was impossible, she thought, to go on. He would indeed be sorry, and how foolish she had been. But what had he meant a moment before?

"Is your confession worse?" she asked lightly.

"I think so. A man is so apt to be a mad fool," he said, and lapsed into silence.

They walked some distance before either spoke. Then Claire laughed suddenly. "Philip," she said, "we all three need a change of scene."

He turned, and his face was crimson as he looked at her. "It will be here soon. We can go out in April."

He had answered her dully with a heavy sadness in his voice. It was her golden opportunity, and she took it.

"Splendid!" she cried. "Splendid! I so want to get back to my husband. I am scarcely able to wait at all."

"I suppose," he said, "it seems a long time that you have been separated."

"Oh, so long," she answered, softly. "And I do so want him."

He walked on, slowly. "I shall miss you very much."

Her manner and expression were those of a pleased, frank child when she answered. "Really I was so afraid I had been stupid company, and I owe so much to you. My husband will want to come clear back here to thank you for your winter's hospitality."

"It would hardly be worth his while. The debt is more than paid."

"I shall be sorry—in a way," she went on. "We have become such good friends, such good comrades with not the least bit of unpleasantness to remember. I shall always be glad of that."

"Yes," he said. "I am glad, indeed, that you feel so."

"If any one had ever told me that I should find so rare a gentleman here"—she laughed—"I would have thought they were talking mediæval gallantry."

"Thank you. A gentleman is always himself when a lady is a lady."

Claire flushed a little, and said nothing.

"I shall remember you with pleasure and with regret," continued Philip, his head high.

Her eyes opened wide, like a child's. "Oh, with regret, too?"

"Yes. Regret that you did not come to my cabin sooner, freer, and to stay longer."

"You are a consummate flatterer, Philip," she chided.

"I suppose it seems artificial; one can scarcely imagine that I should be in earnest," he said, a little bitterly.

Her conscience hurt her, though she did not know why. She could have said these things before and thought nothing of them. Why did she feel sorry now?

"I didn't mean that," she said, earnestly. "Believe me, I did not."

"No," he replied, "you answered out of mere indifference."

"But I am not indifferent to you, Philip. I like you very much." She was afraid she had hurt his feelings, and she, herself, was so tense, so troubled, that she was uncertain of her emotional attitudes these days. She felt that somehow she had been cruel and very ungracious toward the man to whom she owed so much.

"I know," he said, "one is interested, of course, in a novel foreign mountaineer."

She was beginning to feel achey, and tears were near the surface.

"Philip, why do you misunderstand me?" she cried. "It isn't that at all. I like you for the man you are."

He smiled sadly. "And did it ever occur to you

that I might love you for the woman you are?" he said suddenly, his good resolutions all gone.

She stopped and her breath quickened. Over her rushed a tide of fear, regret, sorrow. Even then she wondered that it was pity and not anger which moved her.

"I do not believe that. How could you?" she said swiftly.

"You cannot even conceive of my loving you?"

"I—I can, Philip,—it isn't that,—I—I—" she was floundering among her own emotions—"I can under other circumstances, different conditions. Oh, don't you see,—think of—" she had almost said "Lawrence" but hastily substituted—"my husband!"

"I have thought of him. From the day you came he has haunted my footsteps. But after all, he thinks you are dead."

"But I love him. Think of that, too."

"Oh, Claire, Claire, I have seen you when I felt perhaps you might—might learn to love me."

"Philip, it is impossible!" she cried. "Please don't let's spoil everything now. I so wanted to be just friends."

His face kindled and his deep eyes glowed with a fire that both terrorised and fascinated her.

"We cannot be that, Claire." His voice vibrated with growing passion. They stood, facing each other, and she trembled like a reed in the wind.

"I saw you this morning in his arms"—he was tense and speaking rapidly—"and I knew then that

I loved you. Loved you with all the soul of me! I could have killed him, I tell you. Claire, Claire, I love you! You must not deny me love."

She did not, could not, answer; her tongue refused to move, and her dry, hot mouth felt as if she would smother. She looked into his eyes and said nothing, while she shook violently.

"Claire!" he cried. "Claire! I love you!" His arms closed around her and he held her tightly. His eyes burned into her own with a flame that was contagious in its intensity. She gasped, trembled, and did not struggle, though in her mind she was crying, anguished, "Lawrence! Lawrence!"

He pressed her more tightly, and his body against her own stirred in her a passion beyond the control of will. Her eyes lighted warmly and then closed. She felt suffocated, weak, and her senses reeled. His head bent, and his lips were pressed fiercely against her own parted ones, stopping the cry that rose to her throat. He held her fast, keeping his lips against her own until she felt her strength giving. She half leaned against him, letting the weight of her body sink into his arms.

A savage joy sprang into his eyes. She opened her own and saw. Throwing up her hands wildly, she struck his face, twisted her body free, and shoving him from her, stood, white, defiant, and determined.

She was not angry with Philip, only with herself,

but the storm of self-reproach that swept over her burst into bitter, scorching words against him.

"You, you coward! You dare to touch me, to take me that way! If I had only known what sort of a thing you were, you, you viper! Oh, to be here with you!"

His dark eyes flashed with sudden rage, and he moved to seize her. She stood defiantly before him, her white face cold as enraged chastity itself, and his anger died. Into his face came the dejected, suffering look of a man whose passion ebbs before the compelling force of a woman's scorn.

"Forgive me, Claire," he moaned, "forgive me. I was mad, mad."

She knew he was sincere, and she smiled sadly.

"I know, Philip," she said. "I understand, but you must realise that it is impossible. Won't you see that? It was, perhaps, partly my fault. Forgive me if it was, and let us be friends Philip, I want a friend," she continued, "I need one, a big, strong man whom I can trust, whom I know to be my loyal friend and my husband's friend."

He put out his hand, shame and love mingling in his face.

"I will be that friend, Claire," he said, earnestly.

She took his hand, her mind breaking with relief. She felt she was going to cry, and she leaned forward to hide her filling eyes.

"Oh, Philip, God bless you! You do not know

what this means to me! You will never know. I thank you, I thank you!"

The tears rushed down her cheeks and dropped upon their clasped hands.

"Claire, don't, please, please don't," Philip pleaded, anguish in his tone.

She stopped, forced back her sobs, and smiled at him.

"Philip Ortez," she said, "I shall make you glad of this."

Deep in his heart, the words gave him hope. He grasped at them as a drowning man at a life-belt, but he did not voice the hope.

"I want to spend much of my time with you, Philip, in the out-of-doors. I must do it, and it is such a relief to know that I can do it without—without fear. You will be just my friend, won't you?"

"If it is in my power, I will." He spoke as a knight of old, taking a holy vow, and in his heart was the deep, sacred sense of the spirit that still moved in his idealistic soul.

Claire laughed joyously, almost hysterically, with the peace that came over her at the sound of his words. She was sure that all was well. If she had known that already he was building on the promise of frequent days alone, she would have been more afraid than ever. But she did not know that, neither did she know that in her very promise she was preparing a more difficult situation for her

own struggle with herself than any she had ever faced in her life. She was only aware of the crisis passed and the peace that was now hers.

"Let us go back," she said gaily.

Philip, silent, sombre, and filled with the love that made him for the time a devoted knight-errant, walked by her side, their hands still clasped. To him that hand-clasp was the saving hope in his darkness, to her the assurance that at last she had established the foundation of the great friendship of which she had dreamed.

They found Lawrence smoothing his little carved child with a stone. Claire was effervescent with joy. Her great plan seemed sure of success, and she greeted him with a gaiety that was as abnormal as her despondency had been before.

"Lawrence," she cried, "we have had such a walk! And here you have finished for us this beautiful cherub as the symbol of our little home."

Her words stung him with savage pain, filling him with a great fear born of love and jealousy. For a minute he did not know what he was doing or saying, and he was scarcely aware of the words that fell from him.

"Cherubs are said to be symbols of the greatest love." He laughed, tonelessly. "It belongs to you, Claire. Take it."

The child was carved standing upon a stump with wings outspread. In the form and face of the figure there was so much of benevolence, love, and charity

that the imaginative power of this blind artist filled Claire with awe. She stood reverently before it, her heart singing with pride in the handiwork of the man she loved. She interpreted his words as a confession that he had carved it for her as a symbol of his love, and she was humbled before him, before his work. She wanted to throw herself in his arms and to tell him with the gift of her unreserved self how grateful she was for his gift, but she only said, very softly, taking both his hands, "Thank you, Lawrence."

The words struck his ear with a strangely mixed power in their sound. He wanted to laugh at the bitter mockery that swept into him. He had made the image for love of her, and he presented it to her as a symbol of her love for Philip. It was cruel, but he could endure it. Oh, yes, he was accustomed to life's little jokes. He did not answer her thanks, only gripped her hands in his own capable ones till he hurt her.

To Philip, the child brought still other suggestions. Moved by his present feeling of great chivalrous guardianship of the woman who had said she needed him, he felt that it was a symbol of the great sacrificial love which he was privileged to know, and at the same time he felt that it was a symbol of hope.

At supper Claire and Philip were merry with the rare gaiety experienced by people who have gone through trouble and come forth purified. They

chatted thoughtlessly of things present and future, talked of spring and its approaching promise, and the little cabin seemed very bright. In the fireplace the big logs crackled, and the warmth made them comfortably sure of themselves and of life.

Claire was full of her idea for solving her problem, and sure that its success with Lawrence would be as great as it had been with Philip. No matter how stern, how material might be his talk, the soul of the man who had carved that figure was highly spiritual. To have achieved it as he had done without sight, was the greatest proof of the divinity that burned within.

She spoke at great length of her home, of her husband, and of the time when she would look back upon these days with deep joy.

Lawrence sat silent and listened. Though they tried to draw him into the conversation, he would take no part in their talk. He was thinking wildly bitter things against Claire, against himself, and against Philip. Spurred by jealousy, he misread all their gaiety as the result of an afternoon of love-making. He thought of Claire in Philip's arms, and almost groaned aloud. He told himself wrathfully that her increased talk about Howard was only an attempt to deceive him, and he said to himself, "Fool, to think that sort of rubbish would mislead me! It is as old as woman's falsity."

Then he grew ashamed of his thoughts, and abused himself for being a suspicious wretch. He

laughed inwardly at his absurdity, the while he sat, stupid, pouting, and unresponsive.

After supper, he smoked, moodily. Philip sat in a reverie, and Claire cleared the table. She tried to get Lawrence to talk, failed, and fell to wondering what the matter was. Had she hurt him? Was she not appreciative enough of his work? Could she have said the wrong thing? She watched him as he smoked, his face gloomy beyond all reason, and her heart ached with love and sympathy.

She wondered if he was deep in the black despair that sometimes seized him at the end of the day because of his blindness. Perhaps he was tired out, nervous, from his strain at carving, and needed rest. How she would love to go and sit beside him, on the arm of his chair, and comfort him! She thought of his arm around her waist and thrilled at the sensation her imagination created.

Then she remembered her resolution. She was going to send him out of her life, loving him still but firm for her husband's sake. For a moment she resented the thought of her husband, then rebuked herself. It was not his fault that she had fallen in love with this blind artist, and Howard was very fond of her. She would go home to him with a love still able to be restored by association.

The dishes were done, everything was quiet in the cabin, and she stood looking at Lawrence. He was surely very despondent. She walked to him, slowly, her back to Philip so that he did not see the

deep tenderness in her eyes as she laid her hand on Lawrence's head.

"You're tired, Lawrence boy," she said, softly, "and no wonder. You don't know what this cherub means to me." Her voice faltered and she turned toward her room, letting her hand caress his head. "Go to bed and get up rested, please, Lawrence," —and then, as an after thought which he did not recognise as such,—"you, too, Philip. You both need sleep."

CHAPTER XII

THE UNHORSING OF A KNIGHT-ERRANT

BETWEEN men and women who have established what they believe to be an unemotional friendship there nearly always springs up a relation franker than any which is otherwise possible. Such was the experience of Philip and Claire during the days that followed. They took many walks together, and their conversation grew daily more exclusive and more personal.

Lawrence, through ignorance of their situation and jealousy of Philip, grew daily more dissatisfied. He would hear the intimate ring in their voices and writhe within. The artist felt keenly that he was being set aside, and his eager determination to live and be in the front rank of warring manhood made him determine to win Claire against this man who, it seemed to him, was taking her from him by mere advantage of sight. He felt that they were shelving him as a blind man, a very nice fellow, but quite outside the possibility of any relation with their real lives. He now thought that Claire was kind to him as one is to those whose situation makes them objects of pity.

There were days when he sat alone before the fire in the cabin brooding until he was filled with

savage hatred of Philip. He would think of all sorts of impossible means of eliminating this Spaniard from Claire's life; then Philip would come in, talk to him, seem so very normally friendly as man to man that his reason mastered his fancies and he laughed at himself. He ridiculed his own thoughts with an irony that inwardly grew in bitterness with his growing love for Claire, and he would end by admitting that Philip was only doing what he himself would like to do.

In his fair-minded moments he did not blame his friend. "I should be a fool to expect him to act differently," he told himself. "In this struggle for meat and mate which we all wage, he is doing what any one would do. I who am losing must at least be just to him." He resolved to be just, and in a little while was again ensnaring himself in his own notions. "She is throwing herself away upon this Spaniard," he thought, "while I sit by. If I were not blind, she would see that after all I am the better man. I put all my power into the carving of that little statue, and she knows it is good, better than anything he has done or can do, and yet—she loves him."

He would rise and walk the floor in his tension. His thoughts would gain speed from his bodily movement, and soon he would rage against the man whose guest he was, against Claire, against life, fate, and blindness. Then suddenly his ever self-questioning mind would demand of him, "Why are

you doing nothing, then?" He did nothing because he could do nothing. That was his answer, no sooner made than contradicted, no sooner contradicted than to be restated, "I do nothing because I will do nothing."

Next he would fall to wondering if he was not inactive because, after all, he was not sure that Claire was in love with Philip, that her apparent intimacy was not mere unthinking frankness. Hope would spring into moments of faith that filled him with joy only to plunge him again into deep despondency. He would recall her little words of praise for his workmanship, he heard again her voice as he scuffled with her in the snow, and felt the caress on his head the night he had finished his carving, and he would be wildly, passionately happy and then suddenly contemptuous. She had cried out that day because of displeasure at his holding her so tightly. That caress had been a thoughtless expression of her joy in the beauty of the carved image, it was not meant for him.

Several times he refused to go with them on tramps or skiing trips. When they were gone he would revile himself for his stubbornness and ache because Claire could not see that he had refused with a petulant boy's hope that she would stay with him. "Why should she stay with me?" There was no reason, he told himself, and again he would be off on a mental whirlwind that carried him still farther from reason. He became perpetually sullen, irrita-

ble, and discontented. He realised it, thought that Claire would certainly grow to dislike him if he continued so disagreeable, and with the thought became even more disagreeable.

Claire, however, was not growing to dislike him. She realised well enough the cause of his condition, and every day she promised herself the frank explanation that would remove all his misunderstanding, that would admit their mutual love, and that would then result in their putting it from them forever. But every time she found one excuse or another for postponement. Some unknown force sent her out day after day with Philip. She said to herself that she must first make sure of his friendship, convince him that she was not trifling when she promised him her loyal affection. If Lawrence suffered in the meantime, he would be the happier later when he found that it was groundless. And the way would be made clear for a common, rational attitude among all three.

Sometimes ugly questions propounded themselves. Why did she enjoy her walks with Philip as she did? And was she sure that she did not want Lawrence to be jealous? Was her conduct logical and inevitable, or was she playing with the situation in order to gain time? Her answers were not entirely convincing to herself. She was not fully satisfied with her reasons for going out so often with Philip,—still, she continued to go.

One morning when they were out in the pines to-

gether, she observed, casually, "Lawrence doesn't seem to be doing any work these days."

Philip glanced at her carelessly. "Yes. I'm very sorry for the poor fellow."

His pity angered her a little. Lawrence did not need his sympathy. "I think he must be feeling badly," she replied.

"Perhaps. But I believe he is moody by nature."

"Oh, do you? I hadn't thought so," she objected.

"It is not strange," Philip went on; "he is so limited by his blindness and so ambitious that the effect is almost sure to be a disgruntled mind. He cannot hope to overcome his blindness, and he ought to realise it. I think that is the cause of his odd philosophy. He certainly would be happier if he could get a more sunlit view of things. He needs optimism, and he ought to practise it."

For a moment Claire was silent. She was not willing to admit that Lawrence was unable to conquer blindness or even that his beliefs were altogether wrong. She had more often disagreed with him than not, but now for some reason she found herself desiring to support his convictions.

"I don't agree with you," she answered Philip, a little shortly.

"Well then, what is my lady's diagnosis?" He had not noticed her curt reply, for he was thinking of something else and was not really interested in Lawrence as a topic of conversation.

Claire was unable to answer; she disliked both

his tone and his expression, but she had nothing to substitute for his explanation.

They walked on in silence for a few minutes through the trees before she ventured lamely, "I don't know what to say."

Philip looked up, smilingly. "To say about what, Claire?" Then he remembered, and continued hastily, "Oh, pardon me. I know, of course. About Lawrence. If I could suggest anything to do, I would. He is an interesting friend, but I have nothing to offer. It seems to me that we can do no more than to let him alone. He will work it out for himself. If he does not, we cannot help. He would not expect us to do so."

"That's no reason we shouldn't try," she flashed, "unless, of course, you quite agree with his argument after all."

Philip coloured slightly and said, "I admit the fault, Claire, but what can we do?"

"Couldn't you get him to tell what's the matter?" she asked, groping for something to say.

"No more than you could. Perhaps even less easily. You know him better than I and understand him better."

She laughed, a little satisfaction warming her at his words. "Sometimes I think I understand him, sometimes I know I don't. As he himself would say, it is merely a matter of blind psychology, is it not?"

"It is not," she answered positively. "It's more a matter of artist psychology, I think."

"Perhaps," he admitted, "certainly the combination is difficult."

"I do wish we could do something for him."

"He would be better off if he would come out with us, but since he will not, he will not." Philip's tone showed clearly that he was inclined to let the matter drop.

But not so Claire. "You are willing to help me, aren't you, Philip?"

"Why, yes, if there is any way in which I can be of service."

"We might stay and talk with him more."

"That is useless, I fear," he said abruptly, his own wishes revolting against sacrificing his companionship with Claire or against sharing it with Lawrence.

"He was unhesitating in his care for me those days we wandered," she remarked simply.

"Pardon me again. I forgot for the time that you owed him anything."

"He doesn't consider that I owe him anything. It's simply that I want him to be as happy as possible shut up here with us away from his own kind of life."

"Oh!" Philip looked at her thoughtfully. "Do you think he could be happier with other people?"

"I'm afraid so," she answered, a little regretfully.

Philip's eyes searched her face. "I should think you could satisfy any one's need for companionship," he said, quietly.

"Don't flatter, Philip. That was a very silly speech."

"Was it? It was not flattery at any rate. It is my feeling about you."

"Please," she said, stopping, "let's not go into that again."

"Very well, but why cannot my lady extend her charity? There are other unfortunates beside Lawrence who have troubles to face."

"Oh, Philip, you really haven't any troubles. You merely imagine you have."

He laughed, a little bitterly. "I suppose a life's happiness is a small thing."

"It isn't, Philip," she protested. "But you can get out and tramp and trap and see things, and, after all, you don't really love me as you thought you did. We've settled all that."

"I know we have," he agreed. "That is, you have."

She looked him over, angrily. "So this is the outcome! I ask you to think of another person who needs our care, and you disregard him for your own little troubles!"

Philip looked down and flushed crimson. "Well, it does seem as if I were selfish. I am afraid I am. But I do not mean to be. I can talk to him if you wish."

"You needn't," she said, angered still more. "It isn't charity I'm asking you to bestow on him. He doesn't need that, and you ought to know it."

She had laid more emphasis than she intended on the word "he," and Philip's face darkened.

"I see," he said coldly. "It is I after all to whom you are charitable. Thank you."

Tears of vexation came to Claire's eyes. "Oh, I do wish you'd be reasonable," she said, half angrily, half pleadingly. "Don't you understand that I am giving you more frank friendship than ever I gave any man in my life? Isn't that of any value to you? Don't you realise how unfair you have been to Lawrence?"

His face grew suddenly white, as he said, "Do you love him, Claire?"

She did not look away from him. "If I did, would it concern you?"

He took one step toward her, then stopped

"Yes, it would," he answered.

Her anger almost mastered her, but she controlled herself.

"Philip, are we two irrational animals going to spoil everything? I had hoped you might at least allow our companionship to live."

He looked at her without answering. Finally, he choked, "Don't—don't, Claire. I have the right to know."

"If I promise to tell you when there is anything to tell, will you be satisfied?" She felt no scruple

of conscience at her pretence of indifference to Lawrence, only a sense of protection for him. She did not know from what she was protecting him, but the feeling gave her a strange pleasure.

"I will," Philip returned, simply.

"And in the meantime will you help me pull him out of his slough of despond?" she asked, smiling with the old, frank, intimate manner.

"Surely I will, though I confess I do not see the way."

"Then shall we go at once and begin our cheering process, my friend?" she said, as though she were conferring a favour by the use of the word.

He winced at her immediate application of his promise.

"Perhaps we would better," he answered sadly, and turned toward the cabin.

As she walked by his side she had already dismissed him from her attention and was busy planning what she might do to make Lawrence happy.

When they entered the cabin, Claire looked eagerly about the room. As she glanced around, her face clouded. Lawrence was gone. His coat and hat were not on the rack, and the cane which he had carved one day from a stick which she had brought him from the woods was also missing.

Claire walked slowly into the room, her mind filled with an unaccountable apprehension.

"Why, how abandoned the place seems without

Lawrence! Where is he, I wonder?" She tried to appear casual.

Philip followed her in and placed a chair for her. His mind, already touched with the potential jealousy that Claire's talk had begun, leaped ahead at her words and he felt more than ever doubtful of her attitude toward Lawrence. Though he quickly dispelled his fear, the thought left behind, as such things do, the readier soil for a stronger weed to spring up in.

"He has gone out for a walk, I suppose. Doubtless, he will be back soon." His voice was indifferent. "Will you not sit down, Claire? You stand there looking about you as though you had lost something."

She was on the point of saying she had, but checked herself, and accepted the chair.

"It's so unusual. He never did this before." Claire forced a smile.

"Well, he will be the better for it; I am glad that he has gone out," Philip answered.

"I know, but it is so difficult for him to find his way through the snow," she said. "He told me it muffles sounds until he is almost helpless in it. His feet can't feel the ground, and he doesn't know which way to turn."

"He cannot possibly go far, and he cannot get lost." Philip's tone was becoming a little edged.

"All the same, it worries me to have him out this way."

Philip started toward the door.

"Shall I go search for him?" His voice, unknown to himself, was heavy.

Claire glanced at him quickly. Her intuition told her he was jealous, and she saw he was angry. She wanted to shout at him, "Go find Lawrence!" and she was surprised at the sudden panicky nervousness that seized her. But she rose calmly and crossed to the fire-place, saying as she sat down, "No, thank you, I think he is able to take care of himself."

Philip also seated himself.

"I think he is," he said. "Certainly he thinks so, and comes near enough to proving his assertion."

She was both angry and pleased with his words.

"I never saw a man less handicapped by misfortune," she remarked.

"He does do very well."

"Lawrence seems all capable sense-nerves, and he is so very efficient with his touch. What a keen appreciation of beauty he has!"

"I think he does very remarkably."

"In the hills he used to describe scenes to me, and do it accurately just from their sounds; running water and wind in the trees." She went on, not noticing Philip's short replies.

"Yes, that is quite surprising."

"He certainly has taught me a great deal about blindness."

"Association with him does do that."

"Do you know, I believe he is one of the most unusual men I have ever known."

Philip rose quickly.

"Doubtless. He is not the only topic of conversation our friendship permits, is he, Claire?"

She looked up at him, and rose immediately, her eyes flashing.

"I think you are more selfish with your theories of altruism than he with his egoism."

Philip looked quietly back at her.

"Perhaps I am where the woman I love is concerned."

Claire turned away and walked angrily toward her room.

"I see you can't maintain a friendship," she exclaimed.

"Meaning, you cannot." Philip's voice was bitter.

She turned quickly and looked at him.

"What do you mean?" she asked him, fearing.

"I mean that you are unfair. You ask me not to talk of my love, you wish to talk friendship, while you are forcing me by your every word and act to think of my own misery."

Claire stood aghast before him. His words seemed to her to be an accusation so grossly false that she was stunned beyond anger.

"I don't understand," she said anxiously.

"You ought to understand. I love you, I cannot help but love you, fight it as I will. You say you

cannot love me because of your husband. Yet your talk is not of your husband, but of this blind man. You say you desire friendship, yet you allow me all that a woman allows her accepted suitor."

Claire was appalled. She stared at him in amazement, faltering.

"Why, Philip, I—what is the matter? I don't do any such thing."

He laughed.

"Of course not," he replied. "You look at me with that warm light in your eyes, because you think I am not human. I am a mere duenna, a chaperone, perhaps."

She sank into a chair and covered her face. "I didn't think," she moaned, and could say no more. A thousand memories of her intimate treatment of Philip swept through her mind. She had considered him as one of her own family, without thought, without intent, because she had believed so strongly in his assurance of friendship. After a pause, she gathered her thoughts.

"Philip, I may have done as you say,"—she spoke slowly—"but it was not because I was not conscious of your manhood. It was because I thought you stronger than you are. I believed you could be my friend and not ask more."

He stood quietly looking at her where she sat.

"And what of him?" he asked, steadily.

"I am worried about him because he is blind, noth-

ing more." She lied, looking straight into his eyes, then rose and stepped behind the curtain.

"Claire," he almost sang. "I am deeply, humbly, a thousand times sorry. You cannot know how your talk of Lawrence made me wild. I am a fool, I will admit, but I cannot think of your loving him, blind, selfish, egoistic, intolerant of other people, I cannot."

"You needn't," she returned, coldly. Her whole soul was filled with rage. She was recalling that he had said her eyes were alight when she looked at him, and she told herself that it was not true.

"Won't you give me a chance to show myself as I am, Claire? I want to prove to you that I am not a selfish beast."

She thought of Lawrence's cynical view of Philip's sentiments, and she laughed.

Philip groaned, and then said again, "Aren't you fair enough to do that, Claire?"

"And what will you read in my eyes next?" she inquired icily.

"Whatever is there," he answered.

"But your imagination spoils your sight," she returned.

"Perhaps. I will not deny that I am not myself where you are concerned. But I ask only for one more trial. And I will do my best."

Claire was growing more and more worried about Lawrence. What could have happened to him?

"Then go and find Lawrence," she said suddenly.

CHAPTER XIII

FAINT HEART AND FAIR LADY

CLAIRE heard Philip leave the house, and she sat down on her bed to wait and think. It seemed ages that she sat there, her imagination busy with a hundred possible calamities. When she finally heard the door open she was almost afraid to look.

"Lawrence!" Her voice was full of warm gladness.

He was hanging his hat in its place.

"Hello, Claire. Back, are you?" His voice held the impersonal, sullen note that he used of late. "Where is Philip?"

"Why, didn't he find you?"

Lawrence was immediately angry. He thought, "Why should Philip be hunting for me? I don't need his care. Can't I even go out without a guardian?"

"I didn't see him," he returned, aloud.

"I sent him to find you." She was standing looking at him, her whole figure expressing love and relief at his return.

He was too angry to catch the fine warmth of her voice, and his inability to see handicapped him more at that moment than at any time in his life.

"I sent him to find you," she said again.

"He didn't. I came back as I went, alone."

"Lawrence, what is the matter with you?" she asked, pleadingly, with tears in her voice.

He felt the emotion in her words, and was suddenly contrite. If he had known it, he was acting like the sentimentalists whom he ridiculed, but he suffered from the egotist's fate, he did not recognise his own failing.

"I don't know that there is anything the matter, Claire. It angered me to think that you still imagine that because I am blind I need a guardian," he said, dropping into a chair.

She came over toward him, impulsively.

"That isn't the idea at all," she said, still very worried. "It was simply that you told me yourself that you were helpless in the snow."

"I didn't ask to be cared for," he snapped.

"I wasn't caring for you—nor about you," she retorted, in sudden irritation. "I didn't want you to be lost, that's all."

"I should think you'd be glad to see me gone." He was a little ashamed of his own words, but he did not try to remedy the speech.

"What do you mean?"

He smiled ironically. "Even a blind man sometimes sees too much of lovers."

Claire sank into a chair and struggled against the starting sobs. It seemed to her that her whole life was becoming one continual argument wherein

she was accused and in return forced to demand explanations.

"What in the world do you mean?" she faltered. "Are you saying that Philip and I are lovers?"

"Aren't you?"

"Of course not! It isn't like you to say that. And what if we were?"

"It wouldn't be any of my business, would it?" He was bitter.

"I suppose not," she said, weakly.

"You needn't be hesitant about admitting it. It's true," he went on. "Why shouldn't it be? I am a mere piece of excess baggage which you are too kind-hearted to eliminate. I know that, too. Why shouldn't you eliminate me?" He smiled satirically. "If I were Philip Ortez, loving you and loved in return, I would feel like killing the blind man whose presence hampered."

She stared at him, wondering if he were in earnest.

"Then it's fortunate that you haven't the opportunity to feel that way."

"Obviously." He laughed sullenly. "I shan't, because you couldn't love a blind man."

Claire only sat and looked at him, thrilled with the knowledge that he was about to tell her he loved her. She was trembling and desperately afraid of herself. She moved uneasily, and against her will; her lips said, "I could love a blind man, Lawrence."

He sat up and clenched his hands together quickly.

The tone of her voice in itself was a direct confession. But the deep scepticism of blindness would not let him believe that he was right.

"Do you mean that you do love me?" he demanded.

She wanted to say "Yes," but she thought of Philip and was afraid of what he might do, should he learn of her lie. Then, too, there was her resolution to go back to Howard. Strange that her long-planned friendly explanation of her own attitude did not occur to her, but it did not.

Lawrence rose and came toward her, his hands out. He was determined to know at once and for all. The gathering emotion in his breast was growing into an unbearable pain.

"Claire," he said, coming nearer and nearer. "Could you love me?"

His hands were almost to her. She saw them coming; terror, love, happiness, anguish, and the desire to be his paralysed her will. She did not move.

"Yes," she whispered, "I could."

He put his arms around her and lifted her until she was crushed against him.

"Do you love me, Claire?" he asked, tensely.

She did not answer, but her head sank against his shoulder.

Outside the cabin, she heard Philip's step in the snow.

"No!" she cried frantically, filled with dread. "No, no! Let me go!"

Lawrence, too, heard, and released her, stepping back indifferently, as though just going toward a chair.

The door opened, and Philip entered.

"Oh, you're back, I see." The artist was coldly cordial in his greeting.

"And I see you, which is more important," Philip laughed.

"I suppose so." Lawrence sat down, thoughtfully. "Claire has just scolded me for going out. She doesn't like to have me add to the bother I am already." He chuckled.

Claire was still under the spell of her own emotion, and she resented Lawrence's sang-froid. He was as cold as a block of stone. Her heart cried out against him because he could not see why she had said "No" to him, because he believed her! She wanted to cry, but did not dare.

"I told him we were worried," she said, indifferently.

"So we were." Philip was cheerful and friendly.

Lawrence buried himself from them both, and sat brooding, clothed in the blackness that blindness brought when it suddenly loomed before him as the wall between him and his life's desires. The brief instant Claire had been in his arms had made him feel that his life was intolerable without her, and that blindness was the curse of a double living death.

She had told him that she did not love him. She had struggled to be free.

Lawrence failed to read Claire aright because he had not seen her, and because his blindness made him uncertain of himself. That was the truth of it all, the awful truth of his life. He was always uncertain of himself because he was afraid of blindness. He strutted, boasted, lied, and above all pretended to himself that he believed his hard philosophy because he was afraid, afraid of failing to do the things he wanted to do. He saw himself clearly now, he was a coward, a deceiving ape, a monkey caught in the terror of tangling roots, and denying it. He barked like a frightened dog, at the thing that was his master. He was gripped by life, tortured by life, denied death by life, and cheated by life of living. His imagination, fired by his passion, leaped into play, and he felt himself a thousand times a slave, a chained prisoner in the hand of circumstance.

Philip was laughing gaily, and talking to Claire, who listened, answered, and was all the while lost in her own thought. When he had entered, Philip had looked quickly at the two to see if there was aught between them, and had found Lawrence colder, more despondent than ever. He told himself that Lawrence had evidently pleaded with Claire for her love and been denied. At least, this blind man had not been successful, and Philip could afford to be good-humoured. The more agreeable

he was, the more Claire would turn to him from that dark, ungracious form yonder. His would be the victory of pleasant manners. Therefore he talked, gladly, smilingly, while Claire listened, or seemed to listen.

She was rebellious at the fear which had made her cry "No" to Lawrence, and at the same time glad that she had done so, afraid of the future, exasperated with Philip for coming in at the supreme moment, and angry with Lawrence for his stupidity.

Perhaps these tangled relations might have been cleared had it not been for a piece of folly more stupendous than any they had yet experienced. This event occurred the day after Lawrence's walk in the snow.

Philip had stepped out for a few minutes to look at a nearby trap, and Claire and the artist were left alone for the first time since her denial. She wanted him to renew his suit, feared that he would, and sat waiting for him to speak.

But he remained silent, and at last she said, "Lawrence."

"Well?" He did not move.

The psychology of woman has been too often commented upon and attempted by those who thought they could explain. Why Claire was doing and saying what she did, she herself could not tell.

"Lawrence, don't you ever, ever act as you did yesterday again."

He smiled. "It would be dangerous if your gal-

lant should come in less slowly." He was filled with the desire to hurt her.

Claire was angry with him for saying what was so utterly far from her mind and so different from what she wanted him to say.

"If my gallant should come in," she thrust coldly, "he would scarcely appreciate the melodrama you are playing."

Lawrence sat up with a jerk, his rage near the boiling point.

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "I have not interfered with your delightful episode, have I?"

"No, and you couldn't. I mean that my husband—he is my lover—for I know that is what you intend by 'gallant'—would scarcely appreciate the type of man who mopes and abuses the woman who does not care to lie in his arms."

Lawrence sat still, while a fierce, uncontrollable rage consumed him. He felt that to take this woman and whip her into submission would be a pleasure. He thought of the lash he had in his studio at home and wished it were in his hand. With the thought he rose and stepped swiftly toward Claire, his teeth set.

She saw him, and rose.

"I have one way of showing you who is master," he began, and stopped.

She had stepped forward and was standing almost against him.

"Even blindness does not allow you the freedom to threaten."

He shrank back and dropped once more into his chair.

Claire was talking rapidly, savagely. Later she was to be thrown into a despairing self-hate that kept her many a night in tears, but now she went on.

"Do you think I will overlook everything in you because I pity you? There have been times when your impositions, so carelessly thrust upon me, because you were selfish, because you knew I must accept them from you, were almost unbearable. The touch of your thief-trained hands to steal from everything its beauty and self-respect has galled me beyond all endurance. My body has received its last vile grasp from you."

She stopped, appalled at his expression. She did not know, neither of them knew, that love, the ever-changing impulse of creation within men and women, speaks its desire through bitter scorn and abuse when softer words are too slow in finding their way.

He was sitting there, white, anguished, cowering under her tongue, his whole life shaken. Her words made him feel that the thing she said was true. He had always feared it, realising that in a measure it was inevitable, and his great strength was now turned against himself, against his bitter handicap, and he was in that tremendous upheaval that requires a rebuilding of one's faith. His belief in

himself was broken. His belief in his power was gone. Coming after weeks of thought and fear about blindness, Claire's words tore him asunder and made him feel that there was nothing for him but abject misery and dependence upon charity.

Instinctively, his hand went up as if to shield him from a blow, and he murmured, "For God's sake, Claire!"

There was to come a time, later, when experience would have taught him that there is a wild strain in the nature of human hearts which abuses out of a desire to be conquered. He did not yet realise that he had spoken truly when he said that this woman had hidden in her the savage warring sexed tumult of all the struggling ages.

She saw him there, his hand up, and suddenly her emotion changed. It was love, still love crying out for expression, but now she was all compassion, tenderness, and fear. She read in his face what she had done, and her heart was grey with the pain at her own failure. Now all love for her was buried, perhaps dead, under his shattered selfhood, slain in the wrecking earthquake that she had brought to pass with the ardour of her passion. She had meant to sting him into taking her in his arms and forcing her to love him, and instead—— "O God!" she whispered and slipped behind the curtain to throw herself on her bed and weep with a heart wrung by self-condemnation and loving pity for the man whom she had clubbed with his own

dreaded weakness. She had shattered into chaos the strong soul of the man she loved, with the only weapon he would have felt, and she realised now that it was her love, her desire to be his, to be his utterly, that had led her to do it.

Lawrence was still sitting there, motionless, white, and broken. She could see him even with her eyes closed tight against her pillow, and her own life was shaken at the thing she had done into a first great rebirth. She was another woman, a better and a broader woman, understanding herself more completely when the storm was passed, but the agony of its passing was long.

Lawrence was too hurt to move. His mind repeated again and again the words she had spoken. He kept saying to himself, "Blindness has made me that, an egotist beggar." He did not reproach Claire. She had swept him too far from his habitual moorings for that. There was no rebellion against her, none, indeed, against life. Over him rolled wave after wave of self-contempt, distrust, and anguish that shook him with an agony that only the assured man knows when the one he loves most of all on earth strikes dead his faith in himself. He thought of a multitude of things that stabbed anew, but not once did he move in the interminable period that passed before Philip returned.

When he did come, the Spaniard was amazed at the crouching white-faced man whom he found

before a dying fire. There was something so sad in the blind face that Philip felt no suspicion and no anger. He looked for Claire, but she was not visible. He stirred the fire and set about preparing supper while his mind began digging at the problem which he saw in the attitude of the man there in the chair. Claire did not come out to help. She was too exhausted from the storm that had swept over her. In her bed she could hardly smother the scream that kept rising to her lips. She wanted to spring up and cry aloud to Lawrence for forgiveness. She was scarcely aware of Philip as he moved about.

She could have thrown herself at Lawrence's feet and pleaded with him. She was discovering that her whole wild outbreak was a strange expression of her physical desire for this man whom she loved, and the discovery made her as self-detesting as she had been violent in her outbreak. It seemed to her that there was nothing, nothing she would not do to make amends to Lawrence for what she had said. She wanted to tell him what it had been that prompted her, but she dared not lest in revulsion at her viciousness he turn on her and kill her.

"God, God," she muttered, "what have I done!"

Philip was calling her to supper. She steadied her voice, and said humbly, "I can't come out. I'm not feeling very well. Go on without me, please."

She heard him speak to Lawrence, and she strained her ears to catch the answering movement

toward the table, but there was none. At last Philip spoke again in a voice that was full of anxiety, "Lawrence, what in God's name has happened?"

Lawrence was moving now, and she waited with bated breath for his answer. He walked to the table and sat down. His voice was heavy. "I've found myself out, Philip. That's all. I know what I am."

There was a moment of silence. Claire covered her mouth with her hand to suppress a cry. She wanted to shout, "No, no, no, not that, but what I am, my beloved, my adored one."

"What do you mean?" Philip's voice seemed stern.

"I mean that I am indebted to you and Claire for the truth I needed."

Behind the curtain, Claire turned on her face and burst into sobs.

Philip arose abruptly. "Lawrence," he said quietly, "I do not know what has happened to you this afternoon; I do not know what you mean; but this I do know,—I am deeply sorry if anything I have done or said has made you feel that you are an unwelcome guest in my home."

Lawrence stood up and gathered his scattered senses.

"Philip, I beg your pardon, old man. It isn't that at all. The truth is"—and his voice broke—"I have lied to myself and to the world these many

years. Much of it hasn't been my fault, but I must pay the price just the same. I am blind. That has led me to a sort of clamorous egoism which carried me on and on until I came to feel that I was really doing something. I have learned my lesson. I know better. At last, I know that I am a narrow human parasite, worthless, utterly worthless. A blind, clinging, grasping, vagrant beast, fed upon the mercy of too kind-hearted humanity. I am sorry. It isn't my fault, but it is so."

Philip stood for a few minutes in silence. "You're ill, Lawrence," he said finally. "Get back to yourself if you can. Things do not stay at this point in human abasement. I know of what I speak. I have been through that myself. I cannot say anything comforting. No one can."

They went to bed with but a few commonplace remarks, and the cabin became silent. Lawrence lay awake through that night. Claire, unknown to him, spent her vigil in a great readjustment of her life.

CHAPTER XIV

PHILIP TO THE RESCUE

IT is always the little things in human relations that have the most far-reaching results. Claire might have avoided much trouble with a few well-chosen words to Lawrence, but her own mental state prevented her from speaking.

On his part, Lawrence was so shaken by her outburst that his love for her was driven deep into his subconscious self, and, for the time, it lay there dormant. After the sudden volcanic upheaval of his entire universe, he was utterly absorbed in the immediate task of reconstructing his faith in himself. The primitive stages of his thinking did not allow for any relation between himself and the woman who had released the dam of self-abasement. She was unavoidably at hand, reminding him of her speech, and that alone delayed what otherwise would have been an unconscious process.

Claire was not able to forget the intense desire which, she now realised, had prompted her terrible diatribe. Humiliation held her in its throes, and she was reserved, distant, and unnatural toward him.

Philip saw it all, and his mind was filled with conjectures which made him less and less charitable

towards Lawrence, more jealous, and more hopeful of a happy issue of his love for Claire. She turned to him eagerly for companionship. Instinctively she sought refuge from her own thoughts—and from Lawrence—by talking to Philip.

The morning after the incident between Lawrence and Claire, there had been an austere reserve in the cabin. Claire had fled from the oppressive gloom into the open. Outside, Philip joined her, and they walked together in silence. He was determined not to ask Claire what had happened, although he was extending her a silent sympathy which she felt and a little resented.

Lawrence, left alone in the cabin, gave small heed to their departure. He had risen with a frightful headache and a fever. He lay on the bed and thought of his situation, his past life and his future chances in bitter heart-rending, self-condemnatory sarcasm which made his condition even less tolerable than it would have been otherwise.

"I am a miserable groveller at the feet of humanity," he thought, "clutching at shrinking shoestrings for a piece of bread in pity's name. If I could see, God, if I only could!"

He thought of all the little things which his blindness made it absolutely necessary for others to do for him, and his excited mind magnified them into colossal proportions. If his landlady in New York had removed a spot from his clothes, as she had often done, that was a proof of his despised state.

He fell to imagining that he was unkempt, dirty, disgustingly unclean, and that people had tolerated it because they had pitied him. At last, with a cry of anguish, he thought—"And my work, too, it is a botched mess which they are amused at and do not dare to tell me the truth about. It, too, is a jest that the world is having at my expense." He remembered praise and prizes that he had won in contests with other students, and he was too excited to see the folly of his answer, "That was charity, the award of kindness to me. I know now what they thought—that for a blind man the thing was nearly enough correct to be interesting and quite amusing."

His body felt hot, and he went outside to prowl about in the wind and snow, like a despairing beast. His mind kept up its terrible work, and he did not notice the continual drop in temperature. Round and round the cabin he walked, instead of going into the forest as he would have done the day before. In his mind was a sudden doubt of his own ability, and he said that Claire had been right to keep him in. She was more aware of his pitiable weakness than he. At last, however, from sheer weariness he went inside. He was chilled through, but instead of rebuilding the fire and warming himself, he rolled up in a blanket and lay on the bed, chilling and burning by turns.

In the meantime, Claire and Philip were discussing the man in the cabin. Philip had finally broken

the silence by saying, "Claire, you needn't feel so about whatever has happened. Remember he is blind and must be treated less critically than other men."

She knew that that was just what had made Lawrence so deadly white when she had spoken, and it filled her with sickening pain.

She answered unsteadily, "That isn't true. It isn't Lawrence anyway, it's myself who should be condemned."

Philip was thoughtful. "It is like you to take the blame on yourself. You are so kind-hearted that way."

In her present state, his words seemed like a reproach. "Philip, don't," she said sadly. "I know better than that."

He persisted. "No, you do not. You are too sympathetic, and you let your heart get the better of you."

"I wish you wouldn't talk that way," she repeated. "You wouldn't, if you knew the truth."

"Of course, I do not know what happened," he said, "but I do know you—even better than you know yourself."

"Do you know what I've done?"

"No, and I do not care. It was right, I am sure. The queen can do no wrong." He was intensely serious.

"Isn't there any common-sense left in you, Philip?" she railed. "Have you gone clear back

into mediæval nonsense in your feeling toward me? I tell you, you are indulging in foolishness."

"Am I?" He smiled. "Well, if that is the best I have to give——"

"I don't want you to give me anything."

"But I cannot help it, neither can you."

"I have killed a man's love before this," she answered, bitterly.

"But you cannot kill mine. I love you whether you love me or not. I am proud to acknowledge my unreturned love."

"As you please." Claire stopped suddenly. "Are we apt to get anywhere with this subject?" she asked, ironically.

"I don't know. I earnestly hope so."

She looked at Philip thoughtfully. Perhaps the truth about her own weakness might cure him.

"Suppose I allowed you to love me, and you found that you had won a woman whose passions were her whole life. Suppose she should prove to be a mere bundle of sex, all polished over with other people's ideas, a social manner, and a set of morals which she did not really feel, which were deceiving ornaments hiding her soul. What would you think of your prize?"

"I should not love such a woman. I could not."

"But suppose you were deceived and thought her other than she was."

"I hardly expect such a thing to happen. Why suppose?"

"Because if I were your wife you might find it to be true."

Philip laughed aloud. "Claire, how preposterous! Are you trying to kill my love for you with such terrifying pictures of depravity?"

"I wasn't trying to do anything. I just wanted to know."

"Have you been answered?"

"Yes, you are like all of your type, you are in love with what your own desire chooses to disguise as an ideal, and then you shout, Behold, I am not a sensual lover."

He stared at her in amazement. "What sort of a thing do you think I am?"

She laughed carelessly. "A man. And what do you think I am?"

"A very strange woman but a dear one," he said, earnestly.

"Why strange, Philip?"

"Because you talk of love as Lawrence might."

She winced. "He would know," she said. "He does know, perhaps." She was talking to herself, and her voice was pathetic.

Philip's eyes grew fierce with anger. "What do you mean?"

"Not what your very ideal mind thinks," she said coldly.

He flamed scarlet, and looked away. "Claire," he said, softly, "will you never have done stirring

up suspicions no man could avoid and then condemning them?"

"I didn't stir them up," she mocked.

"Who did, then?"

Claire was undergoing a developing reconstruction, but that she did not know. She thought she was degenerating, and the immediate result was to make her careless and ironical.

"Oh, the devil, perhaps," she hazarded.

"What are you, Claire?" Philip demanded, hoarsely.

Suddenly her suffering broke into tears. To his utter amazement, she began to cry unrestrainedly.

Over and over she sobbed, "I don't know, I don't know."

For a moment, Philip stood motionless, bewildered, then his love and natural tenderness swept over him, and he said, tenderly, "Don't, Claire, please."

She only cried harder, weakened the more by his pity. He took her in his arms, as he would a child, and comforted her. She was tempted to struggle, but her need for sympathy prevailed and she did not resist him. He held her in his arms, pouring out his love, his anxiety, his tenderness, and in her momentary condition she listened and made no protest. In her aching mind she kept repeating, "I have killed Lawrence's love with my bestial talk,"—and she wanted love. She did not think of her husband. He was too far away. In her present atti-

tude she exalted Lawrence to the unattainable, and without formulating the thought, she was willing to lie in Philip's arms and take what he could give. They were two of a kind, she thought scornfully. In her bitterness, the bleak snow-covered land with its drooping pines seemed in its cold monotony a fitting background for two such worthless derelicts.

In the Spaniard's mind was but one thought, to comfort Claire and restore her to her usual self. Vaguely he knew that love was already promised by the unresisting body in his arms, but there was no thought of immediately pressing his suit. He petted and talked until she stopped crying, then he stood her on her feet, and said, with a tender laughter in his words, "There, you are all right again. We would better go in. You are cold."

Silently she walked beside him back to the cabin. She was indifferent, she thought, as to whether he did or did not continue his appeals for love. She was under her own deep, unexplained, emotional control which led her forward. She was finding herself, but before she would be safe she would have to throw off a mass of traditional views, beliefs, and teachings. If Philip chose to press his suit while her knowledge of herself still seemed vile and abnormal, she would be surely his. Claire thought herself lost. She had revealed her terrible state to Lawrence, killed his love, filled him with abhorrence, and struck at his life's source.

With silent turmoil in her brain, she entered the

cabin beside Philip. When she saw Lawrence, a sharp pain went through her. He was white as death save for the red spots that marked his fever. She took off her coat and snow cap hurriedly.

"Lawrence," she said, softly, going toward him.

He lifted his head slightly.

"What is it, Claire?"

"I want to do something for you. You're ill."

His face clouded. "No, thanks," he said. "You've done too much for me already."

She shut her teeth upon the words of pity that were at her lips.

"Won't you do anything for yourself?" she begged.

"I'll be all right. It's just a cold, I guess."

Philip came and stood looking down at Lawrence scrutinisingly, while Claire went to the fire and heated water.

"I am going to fill you up with quinine," he announced. "It is never missing from my medicine chest."

"All right," Lawrence laughed. "It isn't bitter compared to what I'm filling myself with."

"Are you not making a fool of yourself?" Philip asked plainly.

"Yes. I know it. That doesn't keep me from doing it, though."

Claire turned quickly and looked at them, her eyes sternly reproachful toward Philip.

"One can't help thinking," she said. "I can't."

"I shouldn't want you to," Lawrence returned. "Indeed, I'm grateful to you for making me think, too."

"She started you off, did she?" Philip smiled.

Lawrence did not answer, and Philip sat down by the fire where he could watch Claire as she worked.

After a time, Lawrence said thoughtfully, "If one could establish some sort of a relation between himself and the ultimate first cause of all this blind snowstorm we call life, things might get shaped with some measure for perspectives."

"Yes," Philip assented. "I manage to establish one, though I confess it isn't clearly logical."

"What is it?" Lawrence asked.

"Simply having faith, hope if you prefer it."

"But faith in what, and what do you base it on?"

"Oh, on my experience. I am willing to accept that."

"I wonder if we really matter at all to the rest of the scheme," Claire voiced.

"I am inclined to think not," replied Lawrence. "We matter only to ourselves and what we can do with the universe around us."

"We matter to God, I think," said Philip. "I don't mean in the old accepted sense, but we must matter to him in some way, perhaps as your statue here matters to you."

Lawrence chuckled weakly. "It mattered tremendously when I was doing it. Now, it doesn't in

the least matter. I shouldn't care if you burned it as fire-wood."

"But you must care," Claire protested, feeling that he was losing interest in his work because of her.

"I don't see why. I haven't any real assurance as to its value. It may be good, more likely it isn't; in any case I have turned it loose to shift for itself. It can survive or not; its doing so is immaterial. Perhaps as immaterial as my existence is to the great artist who conceived the botched job called me."

"But, Lawrence, why insist that you don't matter to him?"

"Oh, because I am scarcely aware of him at all; indeed, I am not aware of him, and I am quite sure that he isn't aware of me."

"You have not any way to prove that," declared Philip.

"True, except that I can imaginatively comprehend the size of time and space and all that is therein. I know my own size, and I can readily imagine that the creator of the whole is no more aware of me than I am, say, of a small worm that may be in the heart of my cherub there."

"We do seem pretty small in the face of the stars," said Claire.

"Yes, and so impossible," added Lawrence. "I didn't realise until to-day how utterly impossible I really am."

"But impossible or not, here you are," Philip laughed.

"Yes, here I am and there I may be, but in either place I am not especially possible. You are, you can go out and make a definite, independent impression on life; that makes you possible in that you are forcing recognition of power and capability. I can't do that. The impression I make is one of incapability. For myself I am impossible and for others more so."

"Which has nothing to do with God," said Philip, in his tone a touch of distaste.

Lawrence recognised it and became silent.

Claire made him take the quinine and heated bricks for his feet. Philip went out to cut wood for the fire, leaving her alone with the sick man. She was so full of her own wickedness, as she conceived it, that she dared not tell him her thoughts. She wanted to explain that she loved him, that she had loved him all along, but she could not. She looked at him, and felt sure that he had now no love for her.

Lawrence was trying to follow out in his mind a searching inquiry as to his relation to life. "If I could only establish that," he thought, "I could get myself straight and there would be something to start from. If I knew which way to move." He was unable to do any coherent thinking. His head ached, his lips burned with fever, and his body kept him busy with the sensation of pain. It seemed

to him that illness made his state more detestable, but it also offered him a chance of escape from the whole drab business. He was quite sure that he wanted to escape, and he would not have believed it if any one had told him that he would resist death to the uttermost, yet deep within him was that will to live which had made him the creative artist. It was working, unknown to him, now, toward the reconstruction he so needed.

He turned restlessly, and muttered something about his foolishness. Claire came and sat beside him, silently. She was wondering what would happen if she should tell him of her discovery of herself.

"Claire!" Lawrence spoke. "Is it possible for any one to get his life platform built so that it will stand without that first great plank?"

"What plank?"

"God."

"I don't know."

"It seems to me that you couldn't have shaken me so yesterday if I had been built up right."

"Lawrence," she said piteously, "I didn't mean to do that, to say that."

He waved her words aside. "Never mind, Claire, it did me good. I was not realising, quite, just what I was. I'm finding it out, and when I get right I'll be all the better for it."

"But you don't know why I did it."

"Yes, I do, but it doesn't matter anyway. What

was behind your words doesn't count so long as you told the truth."

"But it does count, and I didn't tell the truth."

"I'm afraid you did. Please don't try to cover it with kind fibs now."

"I shan't, but you don't understand."

"Well, Claire, it doesn't matter, as I said. What is it to me what you do or don't do, so long as you bring me face to face with more truth?"

She thought he was telling her that he cared nothing for her. She did not blame him, yet there was a tiny streak of pride that said, "At least Philip finds me worth while."

"It is simply my own salvation that is involved," Lawrence went on.

"Well, I hope you find it," she said simply.

"I must find it to live," he answered.

"And how do you propose to find it?"

"I don't know. I wish I did."

"You might find it, as you once said, in creative work."

"No, that isn't a salvation. I must have a platform from which to work. Don't you see that, Claire?"

"I don't understand anything about it."

"Pardon me, I didn't intend to force this upon you."

"That isn't what I mean, Lawrence." Her eyes were moist. "What I meant was that you live above me entirely."

"Nonsense," he said wrathfully. "You talk like a silly girl, Claire."

"Do I? Well, I am perhaps less worth while than you think."

"Oh, I guess not," he returned carelessly.

She covered her face with her hands.

"I know you are worth all that I think you are," he continued. "But I am afraid that just now I am too interested in my own salvation to think of you at all correctly."

"Yes," she observed, wearily.

She was thinking of Philip as he had comforted her that morning, and his tenderness compared to this cold statement from Lawrence seemed attractive beyond measure. She admitted that all hope of Lawrence's loving her was dead, and she said to herself, "It is what I wanted. I can go back to my husband." But she did not want to go back to Howard. She received this discovery calmly. She would never go back. But why shouldn't she? She could not tell for certain. She thought it was because she had found herself unworthy, but deep within her was the knowledge that she no longer loved him. It would be useless to go back to him in any event. He could never be the same to her after hearing of her long months with this blind man in the wilderness.

What months they had been! She thought them over, day by day, and she saw what might have been a great joy sink, after a glimpse, into utter

darkness. Before her she saw the endless grey years beside Philip. Yes, she would stay with him. At least he loved her, and she could help him. If she did not love him, what of it? She would be an able wife to him. She could keep him from ever knowing that her heart was away with Lawrence, who would be back in the world at home and have forgotten her.

"Claire!" Lawrence was speaking. "We have certainly reaped a strange harvest from our months of sowing in the wilderness."

"Yes."

"What ever brought it about?"

"I don't know."

"Perhaps it was fate, that you should teach me where I stand in life."

"Perhaps."

"And perhaps you, too, will find that I have been of some value when we are separated."

"It may be."

"I wish things might have gone differently."

"They didn't."

"No, and they can't. Well, let them be as they are."

"I guess we'll have to, Lawrence."

A few minutes later, when she looked at him, he was asleep.

CHAPTER XV

UTTER EXHAUSTION

CLAIRE rose and slipped quietly to her own bed. All the aching pain of her proposed future came over her with its dirty sordidness. She could never stand it, she thought, and clenched her teeth. Well, it was not necessary. When Lawrence was gone, there was the lake. That would be her way out of it all. No one need ever know. The thought of death seemed very sweet to her.

Philip came in, saw Lawrence asleep, and stole across the room to peep in at her. She met his glance.

"I beg your pardon," he murmured.

"Never mind," she answered, dully. "Come in, if you like."

He hesitated, then stepped through, and let the curtain fall behind him.

"May I sit here?" he asked, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Why not?" Her voice was colourless. "Only please speak softly. Don't wake Lawrence."

"He'll feel better after his sleep, I think."

"I hope so."

He sat looking down into her dark, clouded eyes.

There was something so tragic, so sad, and so submissive in them that he was filled with utter tenderness.

"Claire," he whispered, "what is the matter?"

"Nothing. I'm quite well."

"You look absolutely desolate."

"I don't especially feel so."

"Are you happy?"

"I don't know."

He stooped over her, studying her face. She did not move, only her deep, dark eyes looked up coldly into his. He took the hand which she did not draw away, and whispered, "Claire, let me make you happy."

She did not answer. He bent nearer. Her eyes did not shift from his, she saw that he was going to kiss her, but she did not move. If the whole world had come crashing down upon her, she could not have made the slightest effort to escape. All action seemed useless.

He pressed his lips against hers. She did not return his kiss, but she did not protest. He slipped his arm around her waist and drew her up. Still she made no objection. He held her more closely, kissing her again and again. She remained impassive, unable to summon sufficient will power to resist. Besides, had she not decided to be this man's wife?

He was pouring into her ears short whispered words of endearment, giving his love free rein.

"Claire," he whispered passionately, "you do love me! Say you love me!"

"Oh, must I say that?" she asked languidly.

He laid her head back on the pillow tenderly.

"Why shouldn't you?" he demanded. "You do, or you wouldn't let me act this way. Oh, Claire, isn't that true?"

"Doesn't your own heart tell you, Philip?" She could not lie easily.

"Yes, of course. I just wanted to hear you say it, dear."

"Why?"

"Because—because it means so much to me."

"How does it mean any more than my unresisting lips?" She wanted to be fair to Philip. Would he want a wife without love?

He looked at her, puzzled by her calm question.

"Because, dear, it would mean that you put your seal on our divine betrothal."

"I gave you my lips, you held me in your arms, doesn't that mean love to you?"

"Claire, why do you talk that way?"

"Why shouldn't I? Isn't it true?"

"Yes, but you—you seem so unlike the woman you are."

"Oh, I see. But you haven't told me fully why you wanted me to say I loved you."

He stood up nervously and moved a few paces away, but the patient, self-reproachful gaze in Claire's eyes brought him back again.

"Why talk of that at all, dearest?" he whispered. "We have each other. Isn't that enough?"

"Perhaps not. You asked me to say it, you know."

"Yes, but I don't care. I won't plague you. I know you do love me." He kissed her again and then looked at her. Her lips had been cold.

"What is the matter, Claire? Don't you love me? Is that why you wouldn't give me your word?"

It was coming at last. How could she make Philip see, and yet be fair to him, too?

"I don't know what you mean by love." Her voice was carefully toneless.

Philip's eyes lighted. "Don't you want me here beside you? Don't you warm to my kisses? Isn't there an awakened tenderness in you at my touch? Isn't there, dearest?"

Claire's hands moved nervously up and down the edge of the comforter. "If I should stay here with you, that would be the highest proof that I loved you, wouldn't it?"

"What else?" He looked at her, hope giving his face a renewed glow.

Was that all that love meant to him? "Is that what your years of thought have taught you?" she said aloud.

"Why, yes, Claire, the return of passion for passion, of warmth for warmth, of tenderness for tenderness, must be the last test, mustn't it?"

Despite her resolution, her eyes narrowed ironically.

Philip started, and stared at her.

"Would you ever be jealous of my husband?" she asked, slowly.

His head dropped. "No—and yes. Of course, I wish he hadn't been your husband, but we can't help what fate has decreed." He raised his eyes, and then suddenly he smiled. "Claire, is it because of him that you are unwilling to tell me you love me?" he asked softly. "I think I can understand. You'll have to be freed from him in some way, and we must be married, of course."

"I am free from him. To him, I am dead. Isn't that enough?"

"Yes," he answered judiciously, "if your own conscience is satisfied."

She smiled a little, her eyebrows lifting in amusement. "Oh, my own conscience dictates my every act, Philip."

"I know it does," he agreed, earnestly. "But your lips were cold to my kiss." He bent over to test the truth of his remark.

"Do you forget Lawrence so easily?" Claire raised a hand over her face. "Certainly I cannot."

"I beg your pardon," Philip said, rising hastily. "Of course he is to be remembered. We will wait until we are alone to talk of our future."

"Yes," she said. "I should prefer that greatly."

He touched his lips to her forehead tenderly, then stepped silently into the room beyond.

She heard him as he moved quietly to replenish the fire, and it seemed to her that he made enough noise to echo from the mountains across the lake. She must think her situation through. She was studying the look she had read on Philip's face, and was angry with herself, yet she could not help thinking of it and its meaning. Suddenly she remembered the same expression on her husband's face, and she shuddered. She had thought it beautiful then, why not now? And why should she be so contemptuous when probably the same look had been in her own eyes when she had raged at Lawrence because he had not taken her in his arms. Philip was sitting out there beyond the curtain dreaming ecstatically of the days when they would be alone in the cabin, and she smiled ironically. After all, there was but one way out. He would find little comfort in her ghost, and her drowned body would scarcely fire him to passion.

She rose and slipped out into the room. Lawrence was still asleep. She did not even glance toward Philip because she foresaw his look of proprietorship. She went straight to Lawrence, and bending over him as if to arrange something about his blanket, she whispered softly, "Beloved, when I am alone with him, I shall be more with you."

Philip came and stood beside her, his hand resting lightly on her shoulder.

"It looks like a serious fever," he said softly.

Claire listened to Lawrence's breathing and felt his temperature. She stood up, grey with anxiety. "I'm afraid for him," she said, and there was that in her voice which Philip did not understand.

They ate their supper in silence. Claire glanced at Philip occasionally and found in his eyes the anticipated look of tender ownership. She let him slip out of her mind while she thought again of the afternoon when Lawrence had declared his creative principle. How dearly she would love to help him, to have him model his statue of her. He had said that she was savage and elemental underneath her polish. He had known, then, all the time. What a man he was! If only she knew how to find his love, to reawaken it. But no, he would never forget. Well, he would not have been able to care for her, anyway, she was so utterly sensual despite all her training in culture. He would want a more spiritual woman to fire his imagination to do great work. She tried to imagine what sort of woman would be best for his wife.

Lawrence stirred restlessly. She rose and went quickly to the bed. He was still asleep and she stood looking down at him. In her heart was a great tenderness and a great fear. What if he should die? Memories of their days in the woods swept over her in waves of love.

Abruptly she turned to Philip and said, quietly,

"Philip, until I am your wife you must not touch me again."

He looked up, startled, then smiled. "I understand, dear," he said, "I will not."

She sat down at the table to wait for Lawrence's waking. It was late when he did, and immediately they realised that he was worse. Claire gave him some hot soup made from dried meal and helped Philip get him undressed and into bed.

"I'll put some blankets here and sleep on the floor beside him," Philip whispered. "I don't in the least mind, and I can help him if he wants help during the night."

"Thank you," Claire said gratefully. She felt indebted to this man for every kindness shown Lawrence.

Retiring behind her curtain, she pondered over her own course of action. She was surely doing the only thing left for her and the best thing for all of them. Why was love so terrible that she had hurt the man she adored? Would she be willing to accept such a wound from his hands? She was sure that she would. She thought she would suffer a great deal at his hands gladly. But she had killed his love. Love alone made it possible to suffer for any one. How could she marry Philip?

She would do her best; after all, she was staying only as a sort of last resort, a punishment forced on her by fate. It was necessary, and she would play her part to the end. Why was Philip dis-

tasteful to her? His face was not that of a sex-mad libertine. His was the same look she had loved in her husband. It was indeed the same look that had been in her own eyes and would be in any one's at such a time. It was natural. If so, why was it revolting? Natural things should not be revolting. She answered herself at last. It was not the look which was disgusting, it was her allowing love when her own heart felt no answering fire. She must at least do Philip justice. That would mean love for love. If she found life with him impossible, there was always the lake.

She did not realise how much of her thinking was good, how much bad. It never occurred to her that this aching resignation to death as some sort of reparation to Lawrence was itself born out of her months away from her husband and her love for the artist. She did not know that she was coming steadily and naturally to the place where her rebellious heart would answer, at any cost, the mating call.

She fell asleep at last, but long ere morning she was roused by the sound of movements out there in the room.

"What is it?" she called softly.

"I am looking for something in which to heat water," came Philip's voice.

She scrambled out of bed, drew on a few clothes, and went out. Lawrence was tossing on his bed and breathing heavily. She set to work heating

the water herself, and sent Philip back to his blankets. There was a pleasure in doing this nursing for Lawrence. She felt glad that hers was the chance to care for him.

"You're to have the best nursing a sick man ever got, Lawrence," she said, stooping over him tenderly.

He smiled faintly and whispered, "Good, Claire."

"You'll be well so quick you won't remember being ill."

"I know," he murmured huskily.

"What do you know?" she asked eagerly.

"I know, it's natural for you, this kindness."

"Is that all you know, Lawrence?"

"About all, Claire. About all, yet."

"Why do you say 'yet'?"

"I haven't thought it out yet."

"What, Lawrence?"

"My platform, my work-bench for the future."

She laughed, a little sadly. "You would better stop thinking about that for a day or so, wouldn't you?"

"Perhaps. I can't, though."

She drew up a chair and sat beside him. "I'm going to become a regular guard, and if you don't sleep and let thinking wait, I'll scold dreadfully."

He tossed uneasily and turned toward her, his cheeks brilliant with fever.

"I like to hear you scold, Claire," he said. "I shall go my limit."

She rubbed her cool hand across his forehead for answer.

When he at last slept, she continued to watch by his side, rocking slowly in her chair. It was peace for her to sit there and dream. There was rest from her ceaseless weary questionings, and it was welcome rest.

CHAPTER XVI

THE QUESTION ANSWERED

DURING the days that followed, Claire's attitude grew into one of motherhood. She watched over Lawrence for the least thing she might do, the least promise of returning health. There were times when he raved in delirium, and she listened with a swelling heart.

One morning he began suddenly talking of himself. In broken sentences, shapeless phrases, half-finished thoughts, he unfolded a strange tale. Claire was glad that Philip was away at work with his traps. She sat beside Lawrence, her hands clasped, and did not miss a word.

"You see," he began one day without preliminaries, "you see, I wasn't just given the best of chances. That was the beginning of it all. I wasn't fairly treated." She tried to comfort him into sleep, but he did not know she was talking to him and went on earnestly with his unconscious revelation.

"The whole business was a squalid sort of thing banked by mountains so grand in their rugged strength that I never got used to the dirty, dusty, little half-civilised town there on the plateau. Even as a child I felt the intolerable difference between

the place and its surroundings. Men ought to be better up there, but they aren't. They just magnify faults with the bigness of the hills around. Lots of it was romantic, lots of it ought never to be lost, the frank freedom, the vital living, the joy of uncertain victory over the dirt of the mines. It made men wild, wild to the last degree, that ever possible stumbling into gold, pure glittering gold. Why, I saw it as a kid shining like stars all over the side of the tunnel. It made even the children mad, I think. When I modelled rude little figures out of the red clay, I was always on the outlook for a possible gold mine."

He laughed, then went on seriously. "I didn't have the chance to grow up learning things gradually. There was no dividing line between vice and virtue, all of it spread out there street behind street in a glow of abandoned riot. Even virtue flashed with a loose frankness that deceived a growing boy. It was a grand drama. Fifty thousand mad men and women!"

She looked at him in amazement. This was something beyond her knowledge. What was it all that he was talking about?

"There was Josey, she didn't know. I didn't. We saw love played with in hilarious open passion. We thought it was the thing to do. Children oughtn't to see it quite that way."

Claire felt guilty, but he stopped and when he

began again he was on a different line of old memories.

"Why, when I sold papers down on the main street I could see the girls of the district standing around, one block below, in their business regalia. I thought at first they were angels."

Claire sat in wonder and listened.

"The first time I ever went down there I was eight. Eight years old, and one of them called me from the open door of her house. When I stepped to the door, she was coming down a stairway, her white dress open and spread like wings at either side of her naked body. I was sure she was an angel out of my Sunday School book. I could scarcely take the dime she gave me. I never forgot her kissing me and patting my head when I stared so at her."

Claire felt a strangely tender pity for the little chap she was seeing now in her imagination.

"And the fighting, dirty, freckled sons of those women—they kept me hard at it keeping the money I got. After that day, I went down there often. Traded a paper with a golden haired angel for a box of cigarettes, the first I ever owned. It was great, wonderful, to have her cigarettes. I smoked them with a sense of reverence.

"Wright and I played hookey, and the girls hid us all day in their shacks, played with us, teased us about sex, and taught us things we oughtn't to have known. Poor old Wright! They sent him

to the pen for burglary after I had been gone years and was blind. I wonder if I'd have followed him. Most likely would.

"And oh, the hills! There was old Pisga, pined to its cone point, and a race track with a saloon at its foot. I ran away out there once at a big Fourth of July barbecue. It rained like the devil and I lounged in the bar with jockeys and sporting girls, listening to their talk and laughing at their jokes.

"I don't know, a street urchin in a camp, that was all I was. If I got licked, and I did, I was a coward for years and had to give up my pennies. I used strategy, cunning, because I was afraid to fight till I whipped Red. That made a difference. If the old fellow I liked so hadn't given Red a quarter to lick me, I'd have been a coward yet. It made me so mad I licked Red."

Lawrence laughed again merrily.

"That started me fighting, and I fought daily without provocation. Dirty, scaly-fisted little rat, whose stockings sagged around his shoes, fighting for money in the saloons! The men liked me, too. All of them called me their kid. I used to stand big-eyed and watch the faro table stacked with gold. There were days, too, when I went out alone over the hills. I was ashamed of my little figures and afraid lest the boys find my mud-pies, as Red had called a tiny dog that fell out of my pocket in a fight.

"One day in an electric storm I saw a man and his horse killed by lightning. I was awed, and electricity became my God. I worshipped it like a little heathen. I even bought penny suckers and stuck them up in the ground where the lightning played in stormy weather.

"It always seemed that the only things about the whole camp that fitted with the hills were that girl in white and an old mountaineer who fought with his fists alone against a gang of drunks. I don't know why. They just belonged."

He stopped and lay a long time in silence. Claire thought over what he had said, and her heart went out to this man as if he were still the little gamin of the hills.

"Poor little chap," she murmured aloud.

Lawrence half raised himself in bed, talking again, and she was obliged to push him back.

"It was all Paradise, though, compared to that school where the Woman's Club sent me. I didn't want an education. Freedom was taken from me. I was chained with discipline. I had seen too much and I told the other marvelling boys. They talked, and I was punished as a degenerate little villain. I couldn't see why. That first winter was Hell. They all misunderstood me and I them. I ached for my mountains again, and when they sent me to the camp for the summer I whooped for joy.

"I must have been thirteen at that time. The men in camp paid the Widow Morgan to keep me

through the summer. She had a daughter seventeen or thereabouts. Georgia had curly hair and blue eyes. She didn't pay much attention to me at first. I didn't care.

"Then one night the widow went off to a lodge meeting and left us alone. Pearly and the gang came around and began throwing rocks at the house and demanding that Georgia let them in. I was furious, and she was nearly scared to death. She got her mother's pistol and asked me to shoot it. I took it, and opening the door, fired into the night. The gang slunk off, but Georgia was still frightened.

"We slipped out of our clothes in trembling silence and huddled together in her mother's bed. She was crying, and I felt very brave. I put my arms around her and comforted her. She became quiet by and by and slipped her arms around me. After that we found ourselves.

"She said we were in love, and I guess we were. That night was the beginning of my rebellious manhood. Her mother abused us roundly for immoral little whiffits. I was put out, and after that the county kept me. Georgia hated me, for she said I was to blame.

"I suppose that was all right, too, but it made me bitter against what seemed to me an unjust world. I went back to school hating. I never stopped hating as long as I was there. It was mis-

understanding from first to last. I never ceased rebelling against punishment for rebellion.

"It was a hopeless snarl, but it made me what I was when I entered college, distant, sullen, and ferocious. My only joy was in my work, and I spent all my spare time in the studio. Then the second summer I shot off the gunpowder, and blindness came."

Lawrence lay back silent, then began again.

"After the accident it was a thousand times worse. I thought people didn't like me because I was blind. They only pitied and misunderstood. Misunderstood,—that word might be my epitaph. It could certainly be placed over my childhood's grave.

"It was in college that I started thinking. Thought out my plan of militant egoism. It seemed to succeed, but all the time I was afraid it was only pity that sold my work. You know, Claire, as you said, I've got to do it all over again. All of it, building a new platform, a new work-bench. I've got to allow for things. I've got to understand."

In her tension, Claire walked the floor. Would he never stop? That glimpse into his life at the widow's—who was Pearly?—and what a tough little gang he must have grown up with! poor boy!

He did not talk much for a long time, then he kept repeating, "I must build a new work-bench, Claire. That's the thing to do."

She felt at times that she must scream at him, then she would be all motherly tenderness. "Law-

rence," she would whisper, "do it, my man. You can, my laddie."

He tossed, and chided an unseen man or woman for having helped him through charity under the garb of admiration. He was misunderstanding again. He thought everything was charity, pity for his blindness, and he raved. She began to see that this sudden bitterness which poured from his lips was the outcome of years of sorrow, the product of a deep-burning fire to see the beauty his soul craved.

"Lawrence," she cried, "God knows if I could I would give you my eyes."

She knew that he was consumed with the pain of his struggle to comprehend more beauty. Even exaggerating his hunger for sight, she wept beside him. Her whole soul yearned to help him, to give him more of the beauty which seemed the prime need of his nature.

Sometimes he prayed for it, addressing fate, nature, chance, anything, everything but God.

After a silence that was beginning to frighten Claire, he began again. At first his words were indistinct, but as she leaned closer, they cleared of guttural sounds. She listened spell-bound.

"You see, I hadn't done my thinking with allowance for the whole of human character, Claire. That was what was wrong with me. I'm doing that now. I'm finding myself again. It is back with the beginning of things I must start. Back with the first squirm of life in the primordial mud. It's

no use trying further back than that. No use at all. Back of that lies only conjecture.

"There was existence, perhaps, inert unconscious existence waiting to become suddenly aware of itself, aware of its parts and its difference from other things. Well, existence struggling, dreaming of self-knowledge, found in a wriggling, oozing spot of protoplasm,—that's the start of it all. Feeding without hunger, moving without knowledge to food, reproducing mechanically by division, living without instinct, without emotion, without death. For me, that must be the beginning.

"Whether death came, or what it was—a long period without food, perhaps—that started this stuff to changing, I do not know. Maybe it was existence following the way of greatest pressure towards selfhood. Anyway, it started and began its journey. Up and up, out of the mud and ooze, into light and dry dirt.

"The glory of light must have been a great thing then. Think of it, coming into light, out of wet, dark mud. I know what it would be better than you. Light, the first great discovery of life! It must have hastened growth,—warmth, sunrays, heat, cold at night and dark again. The glory of it breaking at dawn over the squirming, groping blind existence of things!

"God said let there be light, and there was light.

"Existence demanding the thing it craved. Was that it, or existence finding light and learning to

crave it? No matter,—light, a thousand miracles of warmth and wonder! Growth was inevitable, Claire!

"Then the craving learned by experience broke into new form. I don't know what it was; a two-celled bug, perhaps,—only that it was craving that did it, hunger and thirst after light.

"It broke loose and grew higher,—higher and bigger. Eyes, eyes to comprehend light, springing into being out of the desire to know light, to find more warmth, more food. God! Claire, think of it! Eyes to see, springing into being in the mud and dirt of things!

"Somehow into the mass motion of it all had come a new speedometer, a new measure for the swirl of eternal motion, hunger, a craving for food, a lusting after life. Death-driven gift to the beast that was! Life, always life, was the one great crowning aim of everything.

"Pain came at the very start of things. Wants unsatisfied drove with the scourge of Hell, forcing eyes, ears, stomach, sex into being, and out of the squalor of it all, still goaded by incessant want, pain crying for peace, more, more, there heaved the gigantic scaly carcass of the dinosaur. Still unaware of things, but driven to move, to grow, to expand. Existence demanding more expression of its awareness of self.

"The beast didn't know what it was. He only grew and grew and grew, till he spread his ugly,

yearning life over hundreds of feet of ground. Eye and ear and touch and a peace of filled belly lay basking in the light, glorying in what they found. Life was good, riotously good, finding things, finding itself out. They fought, fed, killed, bred, all in the effort of existence to know. What a blood-drenched, chaotic struggle for self it was, Claire! There it was, all out in the light, light that burned and blinded, and kept their big, wondering, horny eyes to batting. Oh, it was good to live! it was good to know!

"And so, on and on and on. Touch didn't satisfy the incessant taste for more knowledge, more life. Bodies rising like hills out of the marshes couldn't give the keen joy that existence craved for itself.

"New things again: changed, altered products of the old, bearing in their frames the history, the memory of the old,—it all came, and out of it at last, hunger-driven for more keen life, sprang a biped, hairy, tusked, savage, bloody, lustful, eager to live, live, live!

"He was a beast, glorious. In his flattened head that held the little blood-shot eyes were memory, products of the past, things that harked back for confirmation of present things. He had instincts, that's what they are, instincts, memories of past sufferings, that whipped the organism to go on into keener living. He was sexed, he was hungry, he was vicious, he slept and ate, he bred consciously, carrying on the eager shout within his being for

more, more, more of life. More of existence aware of itself!

"If he killed, he gloried in the blood that still hot-drenched his hairless nose, and he learned to laugh through the pleasure of a filled belly. He learned to cry when he went hungry. Tears came, an emotion, a more specialised instinct.

"He was learning something else, too. But pain still whipped him on, filled him with fear of non-life, and he grew cowardly. Nature had created a new thing, a brain, a specialised mass of cells that can comment, realise, criticise, warn, appreciate, choose better food, get it easier, help to conquer and promote life; the biped used this new thing to understand why he ran from the fingers that clutched at him in the dark and he became afraid. If it brought him new pain, it also brought new pleasure. It was a great toy that could be used to enjoy one's self with.

"It can have the joy of bodily sensations and then recall them, study them, comment on them, on its own instincts, its own memories. It can dream of ways for procuring fuller life, and put the dreams into any desired shape. Man struts from his jungle, laughing aloud, with lust for life and joy at his fulness thereof. But all the while, pain, the darkness, the still inert unconsciousness in existence that oppresses and drags back into its own dead inertness, is laughing still more heartily.

"Everywhere it checks, but man in his egoism for-

gets that he is a slave, bound and hampered, and boasts himself master. Death sweeps in, lightning kills, thunder crashes over him, and filled with fear, with something bigger than he can grasp, he falls upon his knees, and cries 'God!'

"Then begins the mess, the tangled, detestable, bloody, dirty, riotously glorious, sublime mystery that is me. Me and you, Claire. Here we are."

Claire leaned over him, her breath suspended in her eagerness.

"Me, the man, specialised, sex-specialised, made to record, to enjoy, to remember, to create, and to die at last from sheer wearing out myself seeking life.

"And you, you the woman, deeper, more vitally sexed, more complete in your memory of the past, more true in your record of it, less a sport, more a true seeker and knower of life,—you, the embodiment of it all, memory, instinct, fear, passion, tenderness, hate,—cunning, strong, wise, far seeing, and altogether mistress of the whole brute world, mistress of everything in life and destiny save death. You, too, worn out by struggling to live more fully, but not until your lust for life has sent children out to carry on the struggle.

"Oh, Claire, it is you the woman, demanding at any cost that your child live, who gives us our great knowledge, our beauty, our selfishness, and our strident sex, our pain."

Claire caught her breath and sobbed. "Lawrence, Lawrence," she whispered.

"Yes," he went on, "that is the end of it all, I see it now. You, unknown to yourself demanding your child, stung to fear of death without it here in the wilderness, you love me,—I know it, you love me. And I—I love you. It was that which drove you to speak as you did. I see. I love you!"

She sank down on the pillow beside him. In her heart was a great relief which carried her away in a flood of tears. Lawrence talked on unheeded by her. He had made everything clear, and she was utterly happy.

When Philip came in, he found her sitting quietly, in her eyes a deep, calm peace that filled him with wonder.

He smiled at her, thoughtfully, and remarked, "Well, Claire, you look happier than you have for months."

"I am," she said simply.

They did not carry on the conversation. He was satisfied that it was love for him which made her so distant, and he was content to wait until she should be his wife. He sat by the fire, watching her earnestly, and she was too deep in her new-found joy to think of him or of her promise to him.

CHAPTER XVII

ANGLES OF A TRIANGLE

IT was well into April before Lawrence was able to walk again. His convalescence had been slow, and he was still very weak. They had planned to start out by the end of April, but they were compelled to postpone the journey until the middle of May. Philip was fired with impatience. He wanted to get out to a priest and be married to Claire. She, on her part, was glad of the delay. She dreaded the hour when she should have to tell Philip that she would not marry him. Her joy in her love for Lawrence was too great, however, to allow for much thought about the matter.

She looked back upon her yielding to Philip as upon a terrible nightmare, but she still liked him and could not bring herself to limit the intimate ways which had sprung up between them. He did not imagine, therefore, that there had been any change in her.

Claire had never told Lawrence of what he had said during his illness, but her treatment of him was very different from what it had been before. He had come out of his illness with a calm assurance of his future, and he knew that he loved Claire. He did not know her feeling but as soon as he should

be well he meant to tell her of his love once more.

The days passed in quiet serenity while, outside the cabin, the plateau flowed under the pines into green and white and gold with dark patches of blue flowers that filled Claire's heart with song. The lake was open and glistened in the warm sun, while fish leaped in it, sending up sparkling rainbow drops. Claire took to wandering along the shore with Lawrence or Philip or both, talking gaily all the while. She never mentioned her husband, it was only of their return to civilisation that she spoke and of the great time the three of them would have in celebration. They laughed agreement with her words.

As Lawrence grew more and more like himself, there came a time, however, when Philip could not but see that Claire was giving the artist a tenderness, a sweetness of companionship, and a carefully guarded joy which he had never known. It was impossible for him to say to himself longer that it was only her nursing manner.

He took to watching her eyes, and again and again he caught them filled with a deep light which they had not held for him. He now realised that he had always feared Claire might love Lawrence, that he had feared it even on the day of her confession. A fierce desire of possession gripped him, and he swore to have this woman as his wife in spite of Lawrence, in spite of herself, if need be. It was this last frame of mind which gained in con.

stancy until he became a danger to Claire's happiness.

She saw it in his dark expression, and her heart cried out against herself for the time of weakness. Then a great doubt would assail her. Lawrence had never spoken of love since he had regained his consciousness, and she wondered if, after all, his talk had been mere delirium, without basis in his normal mind. She determined to find out, and then tell Philip the frank truth. She was sure that he would receive it as a gentleman should and let her moment of weakness pass forgiven. She went over all their experience together, and she came to feel that in any case she could never live with him. Even though Lawrence did not care, she told herself, she could go out into the world and find her place.

One evening she came into the house and found Philip alone, sitting darkly over his book. She felt sorry for him, and wanting to leave him friendly memories if she could, she walked quietly over to him and laid her hand on his shoulder.

He looked up and smiled faintly, though his face remained clouded.

"Philip," she said, "you look worried."

"I dare say I do," he returned quietly, but there came into his eyes a fierce light that frightened her.

"Why should you?" she asked.

"Claire!" He stood up and faced her. "I do not know what you think of Lawrence. I do not know what he thinks of you. I do not care. I will tell

you one thing. You lay in my arms yonder and said that you would be my wife. If you did not mean it"—he hesitated—"then you are scarcely the type of woman to be allowed to live. I implore you, do not lead me to suspect that such is the case."

Claire gasped, realised her situation, and for the moment was carried beyond all power of speech. She sank in a chair, and stared at him. Then, suppressing her rising fear, she said, calmly, "Philip, would you have me yours against my will?"

His eyes flashed fire at her.

"Would you say you wanted to be mine and not mean it?"

"No," she faltered, "I—I might have meant it then."

"Does your heart change with the passing breeze?"

She was feeling panicky. Her throat was dry and hot.

"I hope not," she said, faintly.

"Bah! Does it?" he demanded.

"No," she said, even more faintly.

"Very well. You lay in my arms there, and told me you would be my wife. Years ago, before you came into my life, another woman played with me. You shall not. I do not know what has happened to bring about the change in you. It cannot alter my will. You are mine by your own lips. It is best for us both that I hold you to your promise. When we go out of this place to a priest, you shall

become my wife. You dare not be untrue to yourself."

She was afraid to answer him. His dark threatening face told her that he was beyond reason, and she sank wearily back in her chair. In her heart she was determined never to be his, but her lips played her false. Despite her will, they whispered, submissively, "Very well, Philip. I understand."

He laughed aloud. "What in Heaven's name made you act like that, Claire?" he asked, once more kindly and agreeable.

"A woman's whim," she said, and hated herself for saying it.

"I don't understand women," he laughed softly.

"Neither do I." It was Lawrence's voice. He had come in just in time to hear the last words. "Nor men, either—except in one thing."

"What is the one thing?" asked Claire, eagerly.

"That, given a normal healthy mind, they will sacrifice all their idols for life. Life is the one eternally insistent thing."

Philip chuckled. "You are yourself again, I see."

"Yes, and stronger than ever in my faith," said Lawrence, sitting down. "I know the price I would pay for life. It is the price every human being would pay, if demanded."

"What is that price?" Philip asked.

"The whole of one's faith in God and man."

"Nonsense!" Philip spoke curtly. "I would die before forfeiting a dozen ideals I hold dear."

"Would you?" Lawrence looked at him quizzically. "Would you sacrifice your own life before you would the love of your sweetheart, for instance, if you had one?"

The conversation was similar to those which they had had months before, but the fire was nearer the surface now.

"Yes." Philip's answer came swiftly.

"Then you are a sex-maddened mountaineer."

"And you are talking like the beast you are not. I know you do not believe that."

"I know I do. I would only die for a woman if she were my life."

"But any real love finds her so."

"Folly. I find my work, my future, my dream of a single immortal statue more my life than any woman," Lawrence exclaimed with needless emphasis.

"I wonder if you really do," Claire mused, half to herself.

"Yes," Lawrence insisted,—"although she might be necessary to that statue. At least I believe she might—and I would feel sure of it if I wanted her badly enough," he ended amusedly.

"That merely means that you are still utterly selfish," said Claire.

"Yes, I am." Lawrence was thoughtful. "It is a paradox, I am so selfish that although I would sacrifice myself to the last degree for a person I loved, yet I would all the time feel that I was a

fool, that I was doing an absurd thing when life was so good."

"I see," Claire observed. "And I know I would do the same."

"I would do it," Philip said, "but I would not feel a fool. It would seem to me right."

Claire looked straight into his eyes. "You would not, Philip," she declared softly. "Your own happiness would come first, and you know it."

The Spaniard's gaze shifted, and there was silence in the cabin. When he looked up, his eyes had changed their expression.

"Yes," he agreed, steadily. "I admit it. Hereafter I mean to have what I want from life at any cost."

"Yet you will go on talking ideals," Lawrence mocked.

"Yes. And thinking them, too."

"While Lawrence will make the sacrifice and go on talking his selfishness," Claire added.

Both men laughed constrainedly.

"And I," Claire continued, "if it is necessary, will lie to preserve my will, and having it secure, will use it to obtain what I want."

"We are at last three delightfully frank, insufferable, unpleasant, and very natural, likable human beings," Lawrence laughed.

"And on that basis we will work out our fates," murmured Claire.

"We will do just that," Lawrence answered gaily.

"Be they good or bad, we will meet our futures with perfect self-knowledge," contributed Philip.

"Then most likely they will be bad," Claire added with conviction.

They gave up talking, and each abandoned himself to his own reflections. In the minds of the two men, these thoughts assumed widely differing words, though they were the same thoughts.

Philip was garbing his impulses, desires, and determinations in clothes that furnished his habitual mental wardrobe. With their marriage, he thought, Claire would learn the real Philip. He would treat her with such deference, such tender respect, and such devotion that she would see the wisdom of her choice. He would prove to her that sex mattered little, was altogether secondary. It was her great companionship, her dear thoughtfulness, her charming personality that he loved. Respect, first of all; happy married life depended on respect; then, common interest, friendship between two human beings, and, last and least important, that wonderful emotion springing out of the divine, God-given, reproductive life of both.

Lawrence was thinking very different words to the same end. He thought of her as his mate, his comrade, and his equal. He admired her brain, smiled at the thought of their hours of intellectual pleasure, dreamed of her as the stimulus to crea-

tion which her mind should help shape into master work.

He loved her beauty and her measureless well of bubbling energy. What a help she could be to him! She was the greatest of all women; he wanted her, needed her. Could he realise his dream? That was the point. Well, no matter, or at least no use in speculating. He would try. If she was willing, what a life of joy and accomplishment lay before them! If not, he had lived alone until this time and he could continue to live alone. Meantime, was Philip the barrier that would keep him from her? He hoped not. He did not believe that she loved Philip. If she did, he would be a good loser and wish her joy. His heart ached at the thought. But, after all, one doesn't die over such things, and he would recover.

"I'm going to get the supper," said Claire abruptly. She rose and set to work.

Here the thoughts of the two men flowed into an identical channel. It was certainly good to sit and listen to her. That sound would be very agreeable, indeed, at the end of a day in one's own home. As for her husband, he was out of the question. If Claire went back to him, she might find him married or in love again, unwilling to receive her after her long months with two men in the wilderness, suspicious of such a thing being possible without more intimacies than he would care to overlook. No, her husband did not matter. She would be

justified and safe in remarrying. Of course, not safe if she returned to America, but that she would not do.

At this point, their thoughts diverged. Philip was seeing Claire as the continued inmate of his cabin. Lawrence was painting a delightful mental picture of Claire as the ever present fairy of his studio in some South American town, or perhaps in Paris. He preferred France; it was a land of more brilliance, more freedom, and certainly much more appreciation of the things in which they were interested. Besides, his work would carry more prestige in the world if it came from Europe.

He thanked the memory of old Roger Burton of Cripple Creek and he rejoiced that he would be able to give Claire the home to which she was entitled. He smiled as his thoughts went back to the mines and the dirty little newsboy an old man had befriended. Burton's quarter to Red had kept Lawrence the boy from becoming a coward, and Burton's slender provision for the college graduate would now insure happiness for Lawrence the man. Many times before he had laughed scornfully at the untouched interest from the miner's bonds. He could make his own living! But now, there would be Claire. The old man would have been glad to see his protégé happy in the love of such a woman.

Meanwhile Claire was doing her work automatically. In her mind there was pleasure at the thought that Lawrence was listening to her move-

ments. But she was filled with a dead weight that seemed likely to break her down with its dreadful pressure. Vaguely, she wished that she had never seen Philip, even that she had never seen Lawrence, or that she had perished with him in the mountains.

How had she ever placed herself in the position she was now in? She had come by the way of a terrible road and looking ahead, she could see nothing but sadness, anguish, and a life of dull discontent with Philip. That or death.

Lawrence had had time and opportunity, since his recovery, to declare himself, and he had not done so. She had had time and opportunity to tell him frankly of her own feeling, but she had not done so. She did not know why. Now she could not. Philip had given her to understand his desperate determination to marry her, and after all she had said and done she had no right to refuse him. If she told him the truth, he might kill Lawrence or her or both of them. These tragic idealists! she exclaimed to herself, what a tangle they can make out of life!

Oh, what a noose she had managed to fasten around her own neck! Would the problem never be settled, one way or the other? She had fallen into an endless, bottomless pit, and years hence she would still be sinking, sinking.

What would she do if Philip tried to force her to marry him? Kill him? Was she, then, so primi-

tive, so savage, so much the slave of her own desires that she would slay to gain her end? She remembered Lawrence's talk when he was ill, "We killed those days, Claire, killed because we wanted fuller life, fuller knowledge, fuller expansion of our own vital existence; we were gropers after more light."

"Supper!" she said dully, and sat down.

They ate in silence save for the occasional necessary word, and afterwards went immediately to bed.

Claire soon fell asleep, with the last thought in her mind,—to live as she wanted to live she would pay any price!

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ROMANTIC REALIST

IT was the first of May when Lawrence at last found himself alone with Claire and decided to speak. The instant he thought of declaring himself, he was surprised at his own mental state. A panic seized him, his heart beat unsteadily, his mouth grew dry, and he could think of nothing to say.

They were out on the lake shore. Philip had left them on his last long trip across the platèau before starting for civilisation. The warm spring wind blew around them, laden with scent of pine and flower. At their feet, the water rippled, and cooed little melodies. Claire sat very still, gazing wistfully at the man beside her. Her heart was a lead weight, and her brain ached with the strain of her problem.

It was late afternoon. All day she had wandered with Lawrence in comparative silence, wishing that he would speak, and observing that something troubled him.

Finally, she moved uneasily, took her hand from her cheek, and said, half-dreamily, "You aren't a bit talkative."

He gulped, swallowed, and laughed. "I'm too

busy trying to think of something to say," he told her, amusedly.

"Oh!" She was provoked in the extreme. "Have I ceased to suggest conversation? You are very tired of me, then."

"Quite the contrary. So far from it, you paralyse my tongue."

"How complimentary!" she said. "Then I suppose your excessive arguments with Philip denote your weariness of him."

"They do."

"I suppose if you were really fond of a person, you would never talk at all."

"Perhaps. I don't know but that you are right."

She laughed gaily. "Lawrence," she said, "you are certainly amusing when you attempt to be flattering."

He grew warm and uncomfortable.

"I wasn't trying to flatter. Can't you see that?" He was almost wistful.

"I don't see it. No, if you weren't trying to flatter, you were surely doing the unintended in a most intricately original manner."

He shifted his position and did not answer.

"Of course," she said, "although you aren't accustomed to flattering, you've taken to doing it almost constantly."

"Well, why shouldn't I?" he asked.

"Why not, if you care to?" Her reply was as

gentle as if she were a submissive object of his whims.

He felt that now was the time to speak, but he could not bring himself to the point. The thought of his blindness killed all confidence.

"Hang it all," he broke out, quite as if it were a part of their previous talk, "blindness certainly does rob one of his will."

She looked at him apprehensively. "I thought you had decided you were the master of that."

"I had, but it seems I was mistaken."

Claire laid her hand on his arm tenderly. Her eyes were dazzling.

"Lawrence, you must master that, you know."

"Why?" he said, thoughtfully. "If I shouldn't, it would mean only one more human animal on the scrap heap."

"But you don't want to be there."

"Of course not. No one does. I don't imagine any one chooses it."

"If you go there, it will be because you choose it."

"I wish I saw things your way," he observed. "At times I feel as sure of success as if it were inevitable, and then suddenly down sweeps the black, and I am afraid, timid, and unnerved."

She looked at him sadly.

"Don't you believe in your work, Lawrence?"

"Yes, that is about all I do believe in."

"Then what is the matter?"

"It is that, after all, thousands of men have be-

lieved in their work to no avail. One can never know whether he is a fad or a real artist. It isn't only that, either. One's work, when it is his life, requires so much besides to make it possible. It is that which gives me the blue fear you see. I always imagine that the thing I want just then is absolutely essential to my better work. Perhaps it is. I don't know. I know only that I am persuaded that it is. Then I set about to get that thing and I fail."

"But do you always fail?" Claire was unconsciously pleading her own cause.

"Not always. Just often enough to scare me to death, when the biggest need of my life seems just out of reach."

"Nonsense, Lawrence," she laughed. "When you were sick, you talked as if you could reach out and pull down the stars if you needed them to complete your life."

"Sometimes I think I could, then the reality of life comes crashing through the walls of my dream palace, and behold, I am standing desolate and abandoned, grasping at lights which are even too far away to be seen. I am clawing darkness for something I fancied I could reach, while, as far as I am concerned, it is clear out of space and time."

She sat pensively looking across the lake.

"Yet you keep on reaching, don't you?"

"Yes—and no. I always wish I could. There are times, Claire, when I don't want to be a realist,

don't want to face life as it is, when it seems too tawdry to be valuable just as it is; then I reach out into the night and cry, 'Let me be the maddest of dreamers, the wildest of idealists, a knight of fancy seeking the illusive dream!' "

Claire laughed aloud as she said, "And don't you know, dear man, that that is just what you do become at times?"

"I know it. That's the joke of it. All the while I mock myself for being a romancing idiot."

"What a state of mind!" she exclaimed.

"It isn't pleasant. Then worse than that, when I attain my star, I spoil it with too much scrutiny."

She started. "What do you mean?"

"Just that. I make a mess of it."

"Still I don't understand."

He thought for a moment, then said sadly, "Take the cherub I carved there"—he nodded in the direction of the house—"I was wild with creative fervour when I did that. I put into it a thousand little thoughts that flashed with imaginative fire. I dreamed things, felt things that should have made a masterpiece beyond all masterpieces, and at last the thing was finished. Still under the heat of enthusiasm, I felt of it, tested it, and found it good. Well, a week later, when the imaginative flame was gone, I went back and looked at it again. It was poor, cold, imperfect, not at all what it should have been. I dreamed a star, and made a block of poor wooden imagery."

"But you underestimate your work. To me the cherub is still a star."

He laughed. "It is what others see of good in my work that makes me hope that sooner or later I will do the thing that will stand eternally a star of the first magnitude."

"And you will, Lawrence," she said, earnestly.

"Perhaps." He was pensive. "Perhaps not. That is where the rest of life enters in. I want many things; they seem necessary if I am to attain my eternal star. I am afraid I shall never get them."

"Have you tried?"

"No, I haven't the courage. If they should be beyond my grasp, if obtaining them, they should prove to be wrong and not the real things I need after all, what then?"

"I don't know." She waited to watch a little coloured cloud float by, and then continued, "Isn't the real interest in life the game you play?"

"I suppose it is, but it's hard on other people."

"Why, and how?"

"Suppose," Lawrence said slowly, "you were the one thing I thought I needed."

Claire leaned toward him, her lips apart, her heart beating wildly.

"Suppose I were sure of it, and set about to make you part of my life, well, if I succeeded and then" —he smiled sadly—"found that you were not the necessity, not the answer to my need, what of you?

It would be an inferno for you, and none the less equally terrible for me. We couldn't help it. Under such circumstances you would be right in saying that I had been unfair. I don't know, certainly you would be right in charging your possible unhappiness to me."

"Under your supposition, Lawrence," she answered evenly, "if you obtained my love, wouldn't it then be my game, my risk in the great gamble for deeper life? Wouldn't it be my mistake for having thought you were what I needed?"

"What if you still thought you needed me after I was sure that I did not need you?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I am too fond of life and too eager to know its possibilities to let that hurt me long. Possibly I should weep, be cynical, maybe even do something desperate, but at last I would come up smiling, calm in the faith that my life was deeper, richer for the experience, and that yours was, too. Or if it proved that yours was not, I should be amused at the shallowness of the Claire that was, for having been so simple a dunce as to imagine that you were worth while. I should thank you for teaching the present Claire to forsake that shallow one, and should find you a rung on my ladder of life."

He laughed merrily. "You are strong in your faith, Claire."

"Yes. This winter and you have made me strong," she answered.

"I have made you strong in it?"

"Yes. Last summer when you dragged me out of the surf, I was full of a number of ideas I no longer possess."

"But what have I done?"

"You have lived stridently all your life."

"Perhaps so. What of it?"

"I see that is the thing most worth doing."

"What will your husband say to such a doctrine?"

"I don't know. I am not going back to him. We are not the same people we were a year ago, and he would no more love the present Claire than I should love the present Howard."

The sky deepened from pink to crimson, but Claire's eyes were on the ground.

"Claire, what do you think is essential to great work?"

"I don't know. To keep at it most likely." She was digging with a little stick in the grass.

"Perhaps you're right," he agreed. "But sometimes I think it is a lot of other things; romantic wandering over the earth, a deep and lasting love, any number of such external factors."

"You don't call love external, do you?"

"I mean a permanent love," he laughed.

"Oh, well, perhaps those are necessary, certainly they would be a help to you, they would be to any one. But after all, even a woman isn't absolutely essential to a man in order that he create great art."

"I think she is," Lawrence insisted.

"Very well, perhaps she is, but"—Claire laughed sceptically—"I know that she is not the all in all, the alpha and omega, the 'that without which nothing,' that she is so often told she is by seeking males."

"No," he agreed slowly, "in rare cases of great love that may be true but in most cases it isn't."

"It is more likely that what you, the abstract male, really mean is that you must have some woman, as wife and housekeeper."

"Perhaps that is so, although even that needs qualifying."

"I know," she said, "but why not be frank about it both ways; that is precisely her situation as well as his. There ought to be less sentimental rubbish and more plain sense about all of it. Women would suffer less from shattered illusions, they would grow accustomed to reality, and be considerably less idiotic in their romantic caperings."

"I admit it," Lawrence said, smiling, "and yet" —he paused—"I want to be the maddest of romanticists, I want to say those things to the woman I love, I want to think them about her, I want to feel them all, all those dear, false romantic deceptions. I do in fact, even though my brain agrees with you."

"So should I, and I would." Then she added softly under her breath, "I do."

Lawrence turned a little toward her, his fingers gripping the grass in front of him.

"Claire," he said slowly, "I—I want to say them, think them, believe them about and with you."

She did not move. Over her there swept a great joy, and her thinking stopped. She was feeling all the dear things she had just condemned, and she looked at her lover. He was blind. He could not see what was in her face, and he was not sure that he interpreted her silence correctly. He was waiting, anguishing, for her answer. She realised then what it was he needed, more than he himself knew.

"Lawrence," she cried joyfully, slipping into his arms, "I know what you need, beloved."

He laughed exultantly, as he showered kisses upon her eagerly upturned face.

"I guess you do, sweetheart," he consented. "What is it?"

She settled down with a sigh of content, her head against his shoulder, and announced, very much like a child saying what it knows to be wisely true, "You need a woman who is keen enough to think with you and be eyes for you, natural and unspoiled by conventional sham enough to be your heart's answer, self-willed enough to be herself and deny you and your selfishness, and above all, mother enough to care for you as she would a child. I believe I am that woman, dearest boy."

He held her tight in his arms and smiled.

"I not only think, I know you are."

For a long time they sat in silence, dreaming, loving, enjoying, and caring nothing for all the rest of the world. At last Claire raised her head from his shoulder and whispered, "Lawrence, before I would be separated from you, I am afraid I would kill."

He chuckled merrily. "Good," he said. "That sounds proper. So would I. We are alive because our ancestors killed to live; they fought to mate, so shall we if need be."

She remembered Philip, and shuddered slightly.

"What is the matter, Claire?" Lawrence drew her closer.

She did not answer. She was wondering how to tell him about Philip, and afraid.

"Are you filled with terror at the mere thought of murder?" he asked.

She moved uneasily in his arms. "No, but I can't say I like to even think of such a possibility."

"Don't then. It isn't very likely to happen," he comforted.

She remained silent, but her pleasure was not untroubled. Her whole impulse was to wait, but her brain kept demanding that she tell him now, and she gathered herself for the effort.

"Lawrence,"—she hesitated—"I—I have something I must tell you."

"All right. Go ahead, but confessions never do much good."

She drew away from him tenderly.

"Because my whole being wants to be in your arms, I will not—not while I tell you," she said, sitting beside him. "I want you to hear and think without my body in your arms as a determining factor in your answer."

"Very well. Go ahead. I promise to be an emotionless judge."

"Can you?" she asked quickly.

"No," he said, "but I will."

They both laughed, and she nerved herself to talk.

"It's about Philip," she said timidly.

He started. "Don't tell me, Claire," he said. "It can't do any good, and it's hard for you, I see. Whatever you are or were to Philip doesn't matter to me in the least. The Claire of this morning wasn't my mate. It is only Claire from now on that counts, and she is not in any way bound to Philip for whatever may have occurred in the past."

"Oh, I wish that were true," she moaned.

"It is true," he asserted.

"But you don't understand. Let me go on, please."

"Surely," he answered. "Say as much or as little as you wish."

She told him then, falteringly, sometimes wondering at his calm, expressionless face as she talked. She was filled with dread, for he sat as still as death, without a word, without a change of expres-

sion to show her what he was thinking. She made many corrections to her explanation and supplied bits of comment in an effort to discover, herself, how it all happened. There was nothing of apology in her attitude, however, and she finally concluded with an account of that afternoon in her bedroom and what she had said to Philip since that day.

"Now," she said at last, "you know all about it. You can do as you please, of course. If you choose to go on, we will have to find some solution together. Philip will not take it easily. Of that I am sure. He is more than likely to become desperate."

She waited. Lawrence did not move. His face was seriously thoughtful, and she was filled with a growing fear that made it harder and harder to wait for him to speak.

When she could stand it no longer, she shook his arm.

"Lawrence, why don't you say something?" she cried.

He read the fear in her voice, and laughed caressingly, as he took her in his arms.

"I thought you knew it wouldn't alter our futures," he said. "I was only trying to think out a just solution unpersuaded by your body in my arms."

"Oh!" She laughed comfortably. He was making fun of her, and she was not averse to it.

"It certainly looks as if Philip were up against a bad future," he went on, amusedly.

"Philip!" she cried, startled. "Are you pitying him all this time?"

"Whom else?" Lawrence demanded. "We don't need pity, do we?"

"Oh, you selfish lover," she chided. "I have been needing and do need it. Philip worries me."

"I see," he mused. "Well, accept my condolences and prepare to pass them on to Philip. Poor devil! when you and I are back in our world, he will indeed need pity."

"Suppose he takes steps to see that I don't go back?" she chanced.

"He can scarcely compel you to live with him."

"He can, and he will. He isn't as civilised as he appears. If need be, he would keep me locked up here and make me his by force or kill me. He told me so."

Lawrence shrugged his shoulders.

"Romantic raving for effect!" he exclaimed. "But if he should happen to try that, well, I think my argument might be as effective as his."

"But how do you propose to stop him? I tell you, he is in earnest." Claire was insistent.

"Why, in whatever way is necessary. If it is my life against his, I'll give him the best I've got."

She looked at Lawrence in wonder. He was as calm as if he had been making small talk at a theatre party.

"Can you plan it so—so carelessly, like that?" she asked.

"Why not? I could hardly allow him to take you by force. I wouldn't choose a fight as a diversion, but once in, I wouldn't stop short of his life. And I wouldn't feel any compunctions afterwards, either."

"Well," she said quickly, "it won't be necessary."

"I think not." He smiled. "We need say nothing about our plans. Once we get into town, all the world is ours, and we can quietly depart, leaving Philip Ortez a very pleasant memory."

They both laughed heartily.

Neither of them allowed for that vast portion of human character which lies beyond the knowledge of the most keen-visioned. Claire was more familiar with the distinctly male phases of Philip than Lawrence,—perhaps a woman always is,—but they were too happy to give the matter any real consideration, and after the fashion of all lovers they shut out the third person from their little self-bound universe.

The whole world seemed a friendly sphere whose entire action was merely to bring them together, and they were utterly oblivious to Philip and his new attitude. It seemed so impossible that anything serious could arise to separate them from each other.

It was late when Philip returned, and he was instantly aware of the change in his guests. The

old serious silence was gone from Lawrence; he was not the speculative man to whom Philip was accustomed. His talk was light, pleasantly humorous, and very genial. He was, in short, the lover. Claire, too, shone with a new radiance.

Doubt re-arose in Philip's heart, and grew rapidly into suspicion. He became less responsive to their chatter. His dark eyes grew sombre with misgiving, and love swelled into longing that made him feel sure that Claire was necessary to his life. Without her, there could be no living for him. He wondered if she and Lawrence had found love. "If they have," he argued, "there can be but one explanation. Claire is unreliable, vicious, and dangerous." His aching desire to possess her did not lessen, however. It became deeper, in fact, with each succeeding thought of her as a wanton at heart, and he set his teeth over his will, assuring himself that all would be well when Lawrence was gone.

He took to avoiding absences and to watching furtively for some confirmation of his suspicion. Claire was instinctively cautious, and he saw nothing that could actually be construed against her. He was of that type of man whose love, burning into jealousy, does battle with ideals which stand against his suspicions and demand actual physical proof before retiring and allowing the beast to run riot.

He knew no middle ground. Once he had seen that which would condemn Claire, he would be utterly savage. His soul anguished to bitterness at

every thought against her purity and truth. He could not accept her as she was. His suspicion painted her black with the sticky ink of a morbid idealist, while his faith, rising from the same ideals, made her seem almost ethereal. His longing for her was an acute physical pain, and he never allowed his ideals to stop his romancing. He insisted that his desire be stated in masking phrases and deceiving glories of chivalrous prattle. He was so torn by his conflicting emotions and ideals that he was fast arriving at a state where his action would be that of a wounded beast at bay. He did not know and would not admit that his own distorted view of Claire was back of his own condition. True to his type, he carried his war in silence, and sought support for his fast weakening ideals in argument. He was wise. Defend your faith if you would keep it glowing.

CHAPTER XIX

THE LAST DISCUSSION

THE time of their departure was at hand. There had been two days of intense packing of the food and clothing necessary for their two hundred mile walk. Now that was behind them, and after a short trip which Philip must take the following morning, they would be off for the ten or fifteen miles they hoped to cover that day.

When night came they were over-jubilant, and they sat before the cabin watching the lake as it shimmered in the moonlight. Claire was pensively silent, though her heart sang. She was dreaming out her days, painting them on the moonlit water, and she paid very little heed to the two men, though unconsciously her whole personality leaned toward Lawrence. What they were saying she did not at first know, but gradually her attention was caught and she listened earnestly with an ever-growing fear in her heart.

She saw the deep fire that burned in Philip's eyes, and she realised that Lawrence was unaware of how his provocative half-humorous ironies were stirring the volcano within the man who sat beside him.

"No man has a right," Philip was saying, "to

think of a woman in his house unless he can think of her as altogether trustworthy, pure, and beyond temptation. If he does think of her differently, he is a beast and wants a mistress, not a wife."

Lawrence laughed carelessly. "The average man wants both in one," he said. "Personally, so far as your talk about suspicion goes, who needs to think either way? I'm sure I don't. I'm quite content to live with a woman, giving and taking what we can enjoy together, and not asking that she limit her time and devotion to me. She may have various outside interests of her own. In fact, I would prefer that life should hold a separate work for her."

"Oh, you do not care. You are too selfish to feel any responsibility for a woman's soul. I would feel depraved if I did not guard my wife's soul by my very faith in her."

"Why should you guard her soul? Isn't the average woman intelligent enough to look out for herself? What she does, she does because she wants to, and for heaven's sake, man, let her have the right to freedom of being."

"But real freedom of being lies in her dependence on me as the head of the house," Philip protested.

"If you happen to be the head of the house," Lawrence added jestingly.

"But I would be the head of the house. It is my right and my duty."

"Poor Mrs. Ortez, if there ever is one," Lawrence continued, joking. "She is to be guarded by a great, aggressive, possessing husband. What if she happens to want something you don't approve of?"

"She won't. A good woman doesn't."

"But suppose your woman isn't good, and does?"

"I should have to explain to her her mistake."

"And then when she says 'But I don't regard it as a mistake, I think it quite right,' what will you do?"

"I wouldn't have a woman who would hold such views."

"What is it you want for a wife, Philip? A brainless feminine body who is content to be your slave?"

"I should be ashamed to speak of any woman I cared for in those terms. One doesn't marry a woman who can be thought of in terms of sex."

"Perhaps 'one doesn't.' I would. I should want her to be very well aware of her exact physical potentialities, and to think enough about them to understand herself."

"Then you would want an unwholesome wife, my friend."

"Not at all. I want a natural one, that's all. Moreover," he added joyously, "I shall have one."

Philip glanced at him quickly. Into his mind flashed the memory of Claire's words in the room that fatal afternoon.

"I shall never marry such a woman," he declared, and added, "but I mean to have one whose devotion is so pure that even her talk to me of such things will be holy."

Lawrence laughed heartily.

"Philip," he said, still chuckling, "you seem to think we human beings are half supernatural and half stinking dirt. Why in heaven's name don't you once see us as plain, healthy, intelligent animals?"

"Because we are half gods, half beasts."

"So I was once told by the son of an ancient mind whose farthest mental frontier reached 1123 A.D."

Philip rose and faced Lawrence, then looked shamefacedly at Claire, and sat down again.

"You think you are advanced because you are still unaware of anything but beasthood!"

Lawrence grinned complacently.

"I am always amused at the way men speak of beasts as if they were something base," he said. "Beast should not be a term of opprobrium. The average dog or elephant, for example, is fairly wholesome and quite naturally proper in his fulfilment of instincts. It is more than one can say for men. Yes, I am a beast, if by that you mean a physical being, and if humanity ever does get anywhere in quest for a soul I suspect they will have to start from that very admission, that, taken

by and large in their life product they prove to be merely a superior type of organised animal."

"Of course"—Philip hesitated a little—"we are animals in that sense. But who can think of us as nothing more? Take Claire, for example. We both know her better than any one else. I could scarcely think of her as an animal, subject only to its instincts. Even allowing that she is a very intelligent animal, it isn't all or even the better part of her, any more than it is of any good woman."

The speech was self-revealing, and Lawrence smiled.

"Now it is strange," he observed, "that is precisely the way I should think of Claire if I wanted to see her in the best possible light, as the most splendidly intelligent, healthy animal I ever knew."

"You are more insulting than you intend. I am glad that you do not mean to be," Philip growled.

"Tra-la-la. I shouldn't insult her for a good deal."

"Yet your attitude is debasing," Philip retorted.

"Oh, well, perhaps. She has my apology if she thinks so."

"But you can't actually mean what you say," Philip went on. "Your attitude would lead you to make a cave of your home and a mere lair of your bed."

"Which, by the way, very elaborately arranged, and embellished with thousands of psychological

phases, products of the most highly specialised part of me, is exactly what my home is."

"Well, I certainly should deplore your household."

"Go as far as you like. It ought to be a fairly comfortable home with its basis on frankness, oughtn't it, Claire?"

Philip's eyes flashed.

Claire hesitated, fearing lest she provoke him further, and said cautiously, "Yes, it ought to be based on frankness."

"But frankness doesn't mean an attitude of mind like that," Philip protested.

"What does it mean?" Lawrence asked indifferently.

"It means an established order where love makes it possible for two beings to speak their thoughts freely one to the other," Philip said, with the air of defining infinity.

"Does it? Well, if that is frankness by definition, I have known many women with whom I was in love but neither they nor I knew it until this minute."

Lawrence laughed. Philip flushed, shrugged his shoulders, and stood up.

"I thank goodness I do not see things as you do," he said.

"Even the parable of the Pharisee has its modern aspect," Lawrence murmured chuckingly.

Philip stood looking moodily across the lake, and fortunately did not catch his words.

"I think I shall walk a little," he said coldly. "I can't sleep until I have walked some of your conversation out of my soul."

"Go to it," Lawrence said with a smile. "I didn't mean to corrupt you."

"You didn't. You simply make me angry. I'm sorry, but you do."

"Yes. So am I. However, it won't last much longer, Philip."

Both men smiled at the thoughts that came with those words.

"I think I shall go in," Lawrence went on. "I shall want sleep for the big start to-morrow."

Philip looked hopefully at Claire. She rose with a sigh of weariness, pretending not to see him.

"So shall I," she said. "Good-night, both of you."

She was gone into the cabin, and Philip looked disappointed. He turned down the lake shore, dreaming of the end of his journey, rebelling at the necessity for Claire to listen to Lawrence's talk, and rejoicing at how different his life with her would be.

Inside the cabin, Lawrence closed the door and stepped into the room. Claire stood waiting silently before him, and when he came to her, she threw her arms happily around his neck. He laughed and caught her up.

"So you lie in wait for me, do you?" he teased.

"Why not? I want to capture my man," she said softly.

"You have him, dearest. And by the way"—he sat down and drew her on to the arm of his chair—"permit me to extend you my sympathy for the suffering you must have experienced at the thought of living with Philip."

She shuddered a little, and laughed.

"Such frankness as his home would permit!" she said. "I'm afraid our hearth would not radiate warmth."

"Nothing could warm such a home into anything like the real thing," Lawrence mused. "It was my privilege when in college to stay for a time in a home where the people had really attained the ideal. It was the only home that ever made me envious."

"I shall make you such a home, dear," she whispered.

"No, we will have a mere cave, a lair," he laughed.

She shook her long hair down over his face, playfully.

"Will you be a savage old cave man?" she asked.

"I shall. As savage as they ever made them in the golden age," he answered, and drew her down against him.

"I shall like that," she said, her eyes full of a warm, dreamy light.

"You will be terribly abused by your beast husband," Lawrence said gaily.

"I think sometimes, Lawrence, that I would enjoy being hurt by your hands—having them really cause me pain."

He gripped her tightly against him and his hands tightened.

"Claire," he said, "one never knows what there is in his nature till a woman like you whispers in his ear. You make me afraid at what I feel within me."

"I know," she said. "I'm afraid, too, of what there is in you, but just the same I'm going to be the happiest woman in the world."

"I hope so," he said earnestly. "But you will have to defend yourself against selfishness."

"I have to do that already," she laughed, "but I don't mind. I can, and that is the main thing. Besides, when you really want anything very much, you have a way of forcing me to want it, too, my master lover."

He laughed joyously. "Claire," he said, "if we ever do go to smash, you and I, there will have been a glorious day and a glorious house to smash with. It won't be a petty breaking of toy dishes!"

"No," she whispered, "it will be the breaking of life's foundations."

She slipped from his arms and into her room. Philip was coming in. Lawrence sat down in a chair and Philip threw himself on his bed in silence.

He was caught in the inevitable result of his beliefs. He had argued with Lawrence because he was troubled. His whole being was filled with a great fear. Remembering how Lawrence and Claire had acted lately, he had been thrown into a fever of jealous rage. He was utterly beyond his depth now, and he was silent because to speak would have meant to break into accusation. His imagination had pictured Claire in Lawrence's arms while he was gone; if he had actually known the truth it would have been less agonising than the picture.

He lay there filled with his own thought and dreading the moment when Lawrence would come and lie down beside him. Behind her curtain, he heard Claire moving about, humming a little song, and it added to his torture. He turned restlessly on his bed and groaned.

Lawrence raised his head. He, too, was dreaming of Claire, but his imaginings, vividly alluring in their appeal, were filled with the content of happiness. Claire was his. That was certain, and those sweet dreams should be fulfilled again and again in his life, with a growing depth that would make them the more beautiful. What a creature of wonder she was—and she was his, his, his, to love, to enjoy, to master, and to work for. Yes, and to work with. He would find in her the needed impulse and idea to form his great work. She would make him the

creative artist, the sculptor that he felt he had the power to be.

Philip muttered something, and Lawrence turned toward him.

"Feeling bad?" he asked genially.

Philip did not answer.

"You aren't ill, are you?" Lawrence's voice was full of real concern. He was thinking that it would be bad if they had to stay here a while longer.

"No. Only in spirit. I will be all right to-morrow."

Philip turned over, and Lawrence sat down again to dream.

For a long time he remained there, meditating, and at last he arose to go to bed. Philip was asleep and breathing heavily. Claire was moving a little. Lawrence stopped to listen. The curtain parted, her arms slipped around his neck, and silently there in the darkness she kissed him passionately, eagerly. He held her tightly, her soft warm figure thrilling him with mad joy.

Philip turned restlessly, and she hastily drew back, stealing a last swift kiss. Lawrence walked toward his bed. He heard a low, stifled little laugh, then all was still in the cabin. Claire had laughed for very joy at her love. He smiled tenderly. Dear little woman, she was indeed a wealth untold to him. What a life theirs would be after they got away from Philip!

Poor Philip, his would indeed be a sad fate with

his ideals here to worry him after they were gone. Well, he wasn't the sort that one could help. Let him work out his own destiny. Lawrence lay down comfortably, and sending a thousand dear thoughts flying across the silent room, he fell asleep while he smiled at his own romancing.

CHAPTER XX

THE LAW OF LIFE

THE last morning at the cabin was bright and sunny with the warm mystery of the day promising an infinity of strength for the future. All three of them felt it and were carried along in dreams of anticipated relief. Breakfast over, Philip helped Lawrence and Claire get their packs ready. When everything was done, he said cheerily, "I will be gone less than an hour in getting that furthest trap—I am going to make quick speed —and then we will be off."

They laughed with the joy that was filling their hearts.

"Don't be longer than you can help, Philip," Claire admonished, and Lawrence added, "Every minute that divides us from our life ahead seems an eternity."

Claire smiled at the dear thought his words provoked.

"Good," said Philip in the doorway. "I'll hurry." And he was gone.

Claire and Lawrence stood in the doorway while Philip went singing down the lake shore. Her eyes filled with a warm light, and she slipped her hand into Lawrence's.

"At this moment, dear," she said, "I feel only pity for him. He is going to be hurt."

"Who wouldn't be, dearest, at losing you?"

"Always flattering," she teased. They stood arm in arm, leaning against the door casing.

"Claire," he said, "let's take a last walk around our estate. The place where I first found the real you will always be beautiful to me. I'm less blind this morning than I've ever been in my life."

"Of course, you are," she said gaily. "You've acquired two good eyes."

"And two dear hands and a very wonderful personality that makes me doubly able," he said softly.

They wandered out across the plateau in the direction from which they had first entered it. Their conversation was broken and often meaningless, but eminently pleasing to them both.

"Dear heart," Claire mused softly, "you don't know what that poor, freezing, under-fed woman in your naked arms felt when she heard you muttering that you needed her, as you stumbled down this ravine."

"How did she feel?"

Claire was dreaming back, and she wanted to tell him, but she found her emotions too complex and too rapid for expression.

"And then when you added that it was to use her as a subject for a stone image," laughed Claire, "she was furious with you, and yet she was very

sure that she didn't want you to care about her in any other way."

"Then perhaps I am making a mistake," he jested.

"Perhaps, my dearest, but I am so glad of it that I don't care if you are."

He caught her in his arms. They were very near the great point in lovers' lives when emotions always tend to break all restraint. She clung to him passionately, her lips yielding and holding his in a rapture of love. Together they swayed toward a great tree and sat down.

"Lawrence," she whispered. "Please not, not yet. I want to get away from here before I give you everything.

He stopped in his mad passion, and sat, his head on his hands, smiling pensively.

"You are right, it is better so," he said, "but it's hard, Claire. I love you."

She laughed delightedly, "I don't object to that," and was still.

Some time later, when they returned to the cabin, they were surprised to find Philip still gone. With the whimsicality of lovers, they dismissed him from their thought and sat down in the arm chair together, laughing and talking of the past. Their conversation ran gradually into a clearly defined discussion in which both minds were compelled to think quickly, and they found new joy in their love. Even now, when their whole minds were swayed

by emotion, they were able to think, to talk, and to be alive to the world of intellect.

Art, religion and life, all in a grand mixture, swept into their words in a rather chaotic tangle. Lawrence was talking for the joy of his thought to the woman who he knew would enjoy it.

"You see, Claire," he said after a long discussion, "in the religious instinct we find very little besides a fear of the unknown. What else there is in it is the more valuable part, and it is this lesser section that we can develop and use to advantage."

"What is this lesser section?" she asked.

"The vital desire to create for our God's sake. If we could reduce that into its real place, stimulated as it is by the overwhelming appreciation of beauty in nature, we could establish something far more worth while than a mere deceiving of men about their own kind, their faults, and their relations."

"You aren't quite fair, Lawrence," she protested. "In so far as the church makes for a stronger socialisation, it is a good."

"But does it always promote that very effectively? Most of the socialisation could be better carried on where really educated people were educators. The few of them there are in our schools now are hampered as much as they are helped by the church."

"I don't agree," she said. "The church does hamper education in higher branches, undoubtedly, but in the kindergarten and grades it is a good."

"I don't know," he responded, "I never saw it."

"Well," she cried suddenly and laughed, "whatever we think of the church, I agree that religion isn't always there, and when it is, barring a few liberal exceptions, it is generally misdirected."

"And here you and I sit in the Andes mountains talking when we might be making love," he laughed.

"And here we are making love under the pretence of being intellectual," she rejoined. "What would we do without the dear deceptions that make us such pitiably delightful animals?"

"We'd be a hopelessly unimaginative set of eaters." His answer was quick. "I am convinced that it is our very power to deceive, plan grand follies though petty in deeds, that makes us artists, dreamers, thinkers, and statesmen."

"Perhaps," she agreed, and then slipped her arms around him suddenly. "Is that what makes us able lovers, too?"

He laughed. "By Jove, I believe it is," he exclaimed. "Well, old universal tangle, I do truly thank you for the power to be a foolish, deceived human being. Hurrah for the instinct that makes me call you my divine necessity, Claire."

She laughed happily and leaned against his shoulder.

"For any instinct or deception that makes you more enjoyable, let us give thanks," he repeated.

"And for all the dear bodily claims that make me

your adored one I do give thanks, Lawrence," she whispered.

Their lips met again. She drew back startled, and sprang to her feet with a cry of terror.

Philip stood in the doorway, looking at them with a face from which all human sentiment was gone. He was a raging beast.

"Lawrence," she screamed, "Philip!"

Her lover sprang to his feet. Now he realised his blindness and its true handicap. Philip was there, somewhere before him, doing what he could not know. He waited, every muscle strained with expectant fear and anger.

Claire was staring at Philip with abject terror in her face. Lawrence could not know that; he only heard her breathing heavily, and instinctively his arm went out to her.

"Don't be afraid, dear," he said tenderly.

The man in the door uttered an exclamation. "So"—and his words were sharp as icicles—"that is your damned wanton way. You are the second harlot I have loved."

Lawrence started forward angrily.

"Fool!" he ejaculated.

Claire's warning scream gave him just time to brace his body. Philip had sprung at him like a wild beast, and the impact of his weight sent Lawrence staggering backward. In that moment the Spaniard's hand closed on his throat. The blind

man was paying the price of his defect in the long-talked-of primitive battle for life.

Even then he thought of the scene as it must be, and smiled bitterly, while his hand went to his throat and tore at the wrist that was steeling itself to rob him of breath.

Had he been able to see, the fight would still have been unequal. Philip was taller, wirier, and quicker on his feet. Lawrence's one advantage lay in his keen, quick response to touch sensation, and that gave him his sense of direction and ability to move rightly.

With one hand he tore at Philip's wrist, while with the other he reached steadily for Philip's face.

They had knocked over the chairs and were staggering against the table.

From the corner by the fire-place Claire watched them in an agony of dread. It was indeed her time of test.

She saw Lawrence's hand clutching at the flesh of Philip's cheek. They were panting like two beasts. It was the primitive battle of males for the female of their choice.

Philip's hand was torn free from Lawrence's throat. The blind man laughed, as his lungs filled with air. She heard him mutter between clenched teeth, "By God, I'll spoil your advantage."

They were struggling again for throat holds.

Lawrence was protecting his own, but the hand he had wrenched free closed around his arm, bend-

ing it back slowly, irresistibly toward the point where it must break. She screamed and covered her eyes for a second at what her lover was doing—she saw him deliberately gouge at Philip's eyes with his thumb held hard.

She heard both men fall, and looked again in spite of herself. They were on the floor writhing, their bodies against each other, clawing, striking, digging and biting like two wild gorillas.

Now Lawrence was on top, now underneath, but she could not help but see that Philip was slowly gaining. Though badly injured in one eye, he still fought on unhesitatingly, forcing Lawrence nearer and nearer to death. The artist was even now ceasing to resist, his struggle had become spasmodic. Her lover was being choked to death. She sprang to her feet.

"Lawrence!" she screamed, "Lawrence!"

He was being killed in a battle for the possession of her. Could she stand still and see the man she loved murdered? Her hair fell about her shoulders in a mass. She swept it back from her face, looked frantically around her, then rushed to the wall-cupboard on the other side of the cabin, and drew out a long meat-knife.

The touch of the steel in her hand carried her out beyond the last barrier of civilised thought. Again she was the savage through and through. With a scream like that of a wounded lioness whose

cub is in danger, she sprang on Philip's shoulders, crushing him down against Lawrence.

Senseless with rage and fear, she plunged the knife into his back again and again. Philip gasped, sobbed, and rolled over.

She stared at him in stupid wonder. His discoloured face was there at her feet. She looked down at the blood dripping from the knife in her hand and suddenly she realised what she had done. Shuddering, she dropped the knife and staggered back against a chair.

Philip did not move. Slowly from under him a red line spread to a blotch on the floor. Claire gazed at it stupidly, while she felt she must faint from the dreadful illness that seized her.

Lawrence was lying there, his head almost touching the bloody knife. She choked and leaned her head on her hands. Silence reigned in the cabin where there had been chaos.

Then Claire heard a noise and raised her head. Lawrence was sitting up, his blackened face growing less terrible to look upon.

She dropped into the chair and watched him.

He slowly put his hands to his throat, and then as the pain in his lungs decreased, he stood up unsteadily.

She sat motionless and stared at him.

For an instant he balanced himself carefully, rubbing his throat, then he cried hoarsely, "Claire!"

She moistened her lips with her tongue, but could not answer.

He stooped and began to feel across the floor. She saw his hands, those sensitive hands, move toward Philip's dead body. They would be in his blood presently.

She started forward. "Lawrence!" she screamed.

He stopped abruptly. Her tone had filled him with dread wonder.

"What is it, Claire?" he whispered.

She stood a moment, silently looking at him.

He rose and stepped toward her. "What is it?" he demanded.

She swayed unsteadily and sank into his arms, sobbing terribly, her body wrenched with the agony.

"Take me outside," she whispered, fearfully.

He lifted her and carried her out into the sunlight.

She sat down on the ground and wept bitterly, while he sat silently beside her, seeking to comfort her with his arms.

At last she straightened up and said in an awed tone, "Lawrence, I killed him."

Her lover's hands tightened spasmodically. His face went white, then became normal again. She watched him, hypnotised. Would he tell her that she was a murderer, that he could not love her now?

He wet his lips, then suddenly laughed aloud. Claire could have screamed at the sound. She clutched his arm, and shook him.

"Stop it," she commanded. "What is it, Lawrence?"

He stood up and lifted her beside him.

"I must have a drink," he said calmly.

She stared at him, then brought him some water. He drank it eagerly but with some pain. Finally he dropped the cup at his feet.

"He would have killed me but for you," he said. "Life is a wonderful thing, Claire."

She was still too shaken to do anything but stare at him.

"What now?" she at last faltered despairingly.

He heard the fear, half anguish and half hope, in her voice, and suddenly he caught her to him, and cried buoyantly, "What now? Life, Claire, life! We have the whole world before us. It was my life or his. I am glad it was not mine. To you I owe my existence." He smiled. "Well, we have followed the great animal law. We have fought and killed for the possession of life."

She let her head fall on his shoulder.

"Then—then I'm not repulsive to you?" she choked, sobbing hysterically.

"I love you more than ever. But let's get away from here, Claire. Staying here won't do either of us any good. What we have done is done. We cannot help it. Very well, then, the best thing to do is to forget it. Shall we start?"

She stepped back and looked at him. He was

all energy, clear countenanced, free, frank and normal.

"Yes. I am ready."

She stooped and took up her pack from beside the door. He took his and threw it over his shoulders. Hand in hand, they stepped forward and out toward the life which they had fought and killed to gain.